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CHILDREN IN GUGULETU:
CURRENT PATTERNS AND
RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES.

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ABSTRACT:

The researcher embarked on qualitative research. The title of the study is parental visits to foster children in Guguletu: current patterns and recommended strategies. Foster and biological parents, children, as well as role players in the field of foster placement and visitation, were urged to participate actively in this study, as it is seen by the researcher to be an important document in the encouragement of family re-unification. The researcher conducted the study in the Gugulethu area. A sample of 25 cases, from 80 children who were placed in foster care from February 1998 to March 1999, was used. The Commissioners from both Wynberg and Mitchell's Plain Courts played an active role in this study. Data collection was done through group and individual interviews using interviewing schedules (see annexure) as a guide. The participants were expected to come up with suggestions, which the researcher collated with her own ideas and experience and with the literature which was consulted. These were used as recommendations for the strategies for visitation patterns. The researcher's intention is for the research to form a solid foundation for family re-unification.

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CHAPTER 1:

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION TO STUDY:

During the mid-1990^s the Department of Social Development in South Africa adopted a Social Development approach. In view of this, it is necessary to review current policies and services, to ensure that these are in line with the principle of Social Development, which require that not only pensions and grants, but all social services rendered and supervised by the state, should be done cost effectively, and ensuring the highest possible quality of service.

In this thesis the researcher intends to examine parents' visitation patterns to their children who are placed in foster care.

One of the most important principles of child welfare in the field of foster care is the significance to the child of having his own mother and father in the background. To the young child, his own home is the source of all those deep-seated emotional reserves essential to his survival: affection, well-being, the reliability of life and people, self esteem and protection from dangers, which include those accosting him from the outer world and those arising from inside himself. In the field of child welfare an attempt has been made to put this principle at the heart of its practice. This has taken the form of keeping together the child's natural family, whenever possible, of strengthening those who care for him, and of prohibiting the permanent removal of any child from his parents as long as his home can be built or re-built into a solid emotional and economic unit.

The motivation for this research project stems from a concern about the long stay of children in foster care placements, which contributes to the small percentage of children who return to their biological families, as well as to a concern about those children who get lost in the system because of being subjected to secondary trauma.

Family attachments are central to the psychological development of children. Theories of separation and self-concept formation lead us to expect that children who are uprooted from their families will be likely to experience identity confusion. It is, therefore, accepted in the child welfare field that children in care need help in dealing with separation, and particularly in maintaining ties with

their families. Accepted theory, however, is not being effectively and efficiently implemented in practise.

As the South African Constitution advocates children's rights, this research aims at observing those rights. Children need to be listened to and their views and opinions need to be acknowledged and taken into serious consideration. To a larger extent this research will look at foster placement from the children's point of view and hear what their experiences are.

This study sets out the theory of parent-child separation, applies it to foster care and reviews the literature showing how this theory has been implemented or ignored in placement practice. Through its analysis of audio taped discussions with service providers and children, and video-taped discussions with parents, it examines the practice of service providers and parents in dealing with children's reactions to separation and thus fills a gap in practice research. Chapter one deals with the value of parents to their children, with sharing the parental role, and with the definition of concepts used throughout the study. Chapter two will focus on the research design and process. Chapter three deals with a literature review. Chapter four deals with perceptions of children and parents ventilating their feelings about and experiences of foster care placement. Chapter 5 describes the service provider's perceptions on the same issue. Subsequently the researcher discusses the different responses to qualitative research questions in chapter six. In chapter seven the researcher draws conclusions and makes recommendations.

The Child Care Act No.74 of 1983 acts as a guide for service providers in order to enable them to render effective child protection services. Dorothy Hutchison (1974:39) says in this regard; "The worker must know much, including both limitations and potential inherent in laws affecting children". She goes further stating that the worker needs community backing, especially when children are in unbearable situations. "The social worker requires a tough mind, a tender heart and professional discipline if he is to serve adequately."(Dorothy Hutchison: 1974)

The number of children in foster care is rapidly increasing, because this is the most popular service in response to the crisis situation where a child needs alternative care. The foster parents using it for their own benefit, especially of a financial nature, are exploiting this service. Many children are removed from their biological parents to foster care placements because they are at high risk. Little attention is subsequently paid to the issue of visits.

Foster parents have a tendency of clinging to foster children to satisfy their own selfish interests. They go to the extent of changing the foster children's surnames to their own. This often causes children to have an identity crisis.

2. DISCUSSION OF THE TERM "FOSTER CARE"

Foster care forms a vital part of the total child welfare service programme to children whose well-being is threatened in some way or another. The decision to remove or not to remove a child from parental care is one of the most far-reaching and also one of the most difficult decisions that social workers are confronted with in practice. In the most extreme cases it can be fatal to leave a child in the care of parents whose psychological equilibrium is disintegrating. In such cases the removal of a child is necessitated by the need to ensure his/her immediate safety. In many other cases such a clear line is not available. To remove a child from parental care can prove to be beneficial in certain areas of his life. Such a separation can, however, also lead to deprivation and disruption in other areas. Yumna Adams and Rashieda Ebrahim support the above statement in their study saying; " Foster care is a high risk activity which cannot be entered into lightly. It does hold enormous potential for healing and growth for the children in residential care, and rewards for the foster parents and others involved in the process. However, it also holds potential for intense pain and disruption in the lives of the foster families and a recurrence of rejection and separation trauma in the lives of the children" (Adams & Ebrahim: 1994:1)

As the importance of the family is regarded as paramount, removal from parental care will only be considered after all efforts to maintain the family have failed. According to Eloff (1987:1) foster care is rated, in nearly all cases, as the best kind of substitute care if adoption is not possible or advisable.

The concept foster care has long been in existence and was practised before industrialisation. Children were placed in private foster care with grandparents or with extended families. The only difference in this context is that there was no consideration of the legal system and no finances attached to the placement. Eloff supports this statement that "foster care practise rests on the axiom that a family setting still provides the best environment for the development of the innate potential of a child"(1987:6). Where a child cannot be cared for by its natural parents and

where adoption is not possible, foster care provides a very valuable opportunity to care for a child within a family setting.

Placement of children in foster care also brings with it the opportunity for the biological parents to apply more of their energy to the solving of problems that prevent them from functioning as well-adjusted adults and as parents to their children. To a child it provides the opportunity to be cared for within a family setting during this period.

There is a large number of children in Gugulethu who are removed from parental care and placed in foster care. The latter therefore forms a very important part of services to children.

3. DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTS:

For purposes of clarity, the following concepts that recur in this research will now be defined: child, foster placement, foster child, biological parents, foster parents, family re-unification, social worker, family re-unification services, and strategy.

3.1 CHILD:

According to the South African Law Commission (1998:11) a child is defined as a person who is under the age of 18 years. The South African Constitution, the Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child concur with this definition. The Child Care Act has the same definition. A report on the state of the nation's children says: "In terms of customary law, there is no clear definition as to when childhood ends and adulthood commences. Transitions are marked by phases such as initiation, marriage or the formation of a separate household, as well as physical and intellectual maturity" (2001:23).

3.2 FOSTER PLACEMENT:

According to Heeger, D., Starke H. et al (1987) foster placement is the substitute care provided to children in a family setting.

3.3 FOSTER CHILD:

According to the South African Law Commission (1998) a foster child is a child placed in the custody of a foster parent in terms of Section 15 (1)(b) of the Child Care Act NO. 74 of 1983

3.4 FOSTER PARENT:

According to the Child Care Act NO. 74 of 1983 a foster parent is any person other than the biological parent or guardian in whose custody a child has been placed.

3.5 BIOLOGICAL PARENT:

This refers to the child's natural parent.

3.6 FAMILY RE-UNIFICATION:

This term means the restoration of children to their biological families.

3.7 SOCIAL WORKER:

According to the Child Care Act NO. 74 of 1983 a Social Worker is a person registered in terms of Section 17 of the Social Work Act (Act 110 of 1978). Such a person is employed to render social services.

3.8 FAMILY RE-UNIFICATION SERVICES:

This term refers to the provision of social work services to parents whose children are placed in foster care with the purpose of improving the social and parental functioning in the family to such an extent that the children may be placed in the family once more.

3.9 The concept of *visits* is nothing else but:

- A contact that will re-build parent-child trust and the bond that got lost or was infringed upon by certain circumstances externally or internally;
- A contact that will ultimately re-unite the child with his/her family.

4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

Very little research has been done in South Africa regarding the visitation of children in foster care placement. A lack of emphasis on this aspect has a negative impact on both the child and the biological parent.

Circumstances of children in foster care tend to remain in limbo as they stay for indefinite periods instead of being restored to their families. This raises some questions: Where must blame be placed? Is the agency at fault? Is the social work practice itself to blame? Or does the problem lie with the social workers, foster parents, natural parents and/or the community?

The literature review is based on international rather than South African literature because of the lack of research in South Africa.

Another limitation is that the response of natural parents was very limited. Conclusions regarding the views of natural parents are deducted from the small group of parents who did take part in the research. The researcher therefore had to make extensive use of the foster mothers' knowledge and experience of the situation. Some conclusions are based on the researcher's knowledge, as the researcher is a social worker by profession. It is also based on the case files that the researcher has access to.

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CHAPTER 2

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH PROCESS:

The research design is essentially a qualitative exploratory and descriptive approach using the focus group method to obtain the richness of data. Quantitative facts are present in the analysis of case files, as are the interview schedules administered to experts in the field and to the key role players.

2.1 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT.

Child abuse, neglect and abandonment have been noticed to be rife in the Guguletu area. These criminal acts result in children being removed from their families and their places of origin to alternative sources of care and particularly to foster placement.

This kind of placement is a short-term solution. According to the Child Care Act 74/1983 a child is placed in the custody of a foster parent, the social worker should, after two years, motivate why the child has not been placed back with her/his parents. This family re-unification will be possible only if regular parent-child contacts were maintained and effective family re-unification services were rendered. Failure to keep contact contributes to the unnecessarily long stay of children in foster homes

Although research has been done towards the development of a training programme on foster care placement, too little has been done on the issue of parental visits. (David, F. & Fanshel, E. (1979:85)

Heeger, and Starke, et al (1987) reported that, although this type of care is regarded as temporary, the majority of children are likely to remain in foster care for long periods.

The researcher explored the factors which contribute to the lack of contact between children and their biological parents while they are in foster care and the lack of adequate strategies to combat this phenomenon. This exploration will bring some concerns to the attention of social workers in this field and give all participants in the research an opportunity to voice their views about the issue of contact maintenance and also on what needs to be done. A strategy to improve this service will be recommended by all participants together with the researcher. The

researcher feels that this research will certainly fulfil a need because at present family contact is not seen as one of the important aspects of family re-integration to be considered in foster care. It is also vital to conduct this foster-care research because it will address some of the concerns that need further exploration and clarification and more attention of service providers.

2.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

It has been observed that there is a misconception about foster care. People, especially in Guguletu and Nyanga (areas where the researcher has a great deal of direct contact) approach the welfare agencies requesting "jobs of looking after children". This approach, with its emphasis on remuneration, explains the problem that this study is all about i.e. the lack of contact between children and their biological parents. Foster parents sometimes become stumbling blocks between children and their parents by depriving parents of their visitation rights. This action has negative effects in that it prolongs the child's stay in foster care, it jeopardises the chances of family re-unification or retards the process. At the end of the day it often leaves children with an identity crisis, which inevitably means that the child's personality is negatively affected. According to Heeger, Starke et al (1987) it has been found that foster placement can quite frequently be disruptive, as it can lead to a lack of bonding between the child and his/her biological parents. The purpose of this study is to develop an adequate visitation strategy that will build a bridge for efficient and effective family re-unification services.

2.3 RESEARCH GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:

1. Goal: To encourage parental visits to foster children, with special reference to visiting patterns in the Guguletu area.

2. Objectives: To obtain detailed information about the involvement of all parties, i.e. foster children, foster parents, biological parents, commissioners of child welfare and social workers in the whole process of foster placement, visitation and re-unification services.

- To assess whether the natural rights of children and biological parents are being considered in foster placement.
- To examine the children's experiences with the foster families and their views on these experiences and to examine their opinions about their biological parents.

- To make recommendations based on the researcher's analysis and conclusions about realistic visitation strategies that will lead to meaningful re-unification services and ultimately to have children returned to their biological parents.

University of Cape Town

2.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study used qualitative research methods, as the aim is to obtain in-depth data from participants about the subject and to come up with recommendations. The overall design of the study is exploratory and descriptive as very little is known on the subject. Though research has been done on the issue of visitation patterns in foster care, it has not been thoroughly explored. Fanshel and Shinn (1978) support this statement and say the matter of parental visitation has tended to receive limited attention as a research topic. This is particularly true in South Africa, where fast social and economic change has led to extensive disruption of traditional family systems in recent years.

The researcher attempted to gather data to initiate further studies to either support or reject her findings. Statistics of children who were already in the system and experiencing non-visitation from their parents were collected and compared with those who were receiving visits. In qualitative research emphasis is based on describing the subjective meaning of events. Mouton and Van Schaik (1996) believe that people being studied can inform the researcher or outside observer about their experiences, feelings and reasons for doing things. The researcher therefore gathered in-depth information about the subject from the participants and relied on people's opinions, to examine the effects of non-visitation and to find out what the beneficial and the detrimental aspects of foster care were. The selective use of statistics helped the researcher to obtain an indication of the severity of the problems regarding non-visitation. Unstructured interviews were utilised with the purpose of getting direct quotations with detailed descriptions of participant behaviour, feelings, interactions and experiences. Within these unstructured interviews, interview schedules were used to ensure uniformity of interviews with all interviewees. Both open-ended and closed questions were asked.

The following are examples of questions that informed the questionnaire which is contained in the interview schedule, (see annexure) and which also guided the researcher while gathering data from all the participants.

- Does foster care placement really make a difference in children's lives? Motivate your answer.
- Is there proper consultation with the biological parents and children before this process takes place?
- How do the parties involved feel? and, especially how do biological parents feel about the removal of their children?
- Does the reason for removal have an influence on

visitation patterns?

- Does non-visitation of parents (to their children) have an influence on family re-unification delays?
- What is the nature of the relationship between the child and the biological parents?
- How do service providers feel about the separation between the child and the parents?
- What are the opinions of the service providers about the effects of non-visitation?
- What role is supposed to be played by other parties, i.e. the biological parents, foster parents, foster children and the Commissioner of Child Welfare?

2.5 STUDY POPULATIONS AND SAMPLING:

The study's population is: all official foster caregivers and their corresponding biological families in Guguletu township; and all the child welfare officials and social workers who are assigned to foster children in that area.

The researcher deliberately did not use random sampling, but selected certain foster children in consultation with social workers because it involved a group of children who would not only provide information but also benefit from the research. Prozesky and Mouton talk about "an activity in research which is used to serve the ends to empowerment, conscientization, and emancipation in development" (2001:537). This statement embraces the intentions of the researcher.

The researcher selected 20 foster parents and an equal number of biological parents and 50 foster children for interviews. The field workers who are directly rendering statutory services in the Guguletu area were utilised (i.e. five State social workers and ten Child Welfare Society social workers with whom the Department of Social Services has a contract; these interviews were conducted separately, i.e. State social workers alone and Child Welfare social workers alone).

Permission to gain access to records of the child welfare services was requested from the department as well as from Child Welfare Society for the purpose of selecting the sample of foster parents, foster children and biological parents. Since it is not always possible to locate biological parents, the assistance of social workers was requested in identifying those children whose parents were traceable.

The motivation for the selection of this field of study is the observation of the dismay and acute psychological pain caused to children by the failure of their parents to visit them. It was also observed that those children who received

no visits from their parents stayed for indefinite periods in foster care. This practice negatively affects both the foster child and the foster parent and eventually puts pressure on the field workers who have to come up with alternative placements for the child. With limited resources, it becomes a futile exercise for the field worker to find suitable placement for that child.

Because of a limitation in the Child Care Act No. 74/1983 it becomes impossible to transfer that child if he or she reaches the age of eighteen years.

2.6 DATA COLLECTION AND STORAGE:

Audio-visual aids such as a video camera, tape recordings, and a database to collect and store information were utilised. Notes where the researcher's ideas, feelings and observations were recorded were kept. The researcher conducted both individual and group interviews using interview schedules/sheets consisting of open-ended questions (see annexures). An opportunity was created for all the participants to ventilate, discuss and report their common experiences, problems challenges and their ideas on the way forward. Though little has been done on this topic, data was also obtained from previous documented research.

2.7 DATA ANALYSIS:

Data analysis has been done in a way which is consistent with the objectives of the study, the research design, the level of measurement of data and the rationale for the use of the selected statistical test.

Statistical procedures include frequency distributions given numerically. The researcher uses tables with explanations.

Comments and remarks by respondents are analysed regarding the issue of foster placements and the need for re-integration.

The researcher attempts to analyse data in such a way that it might contribute to a better understanding of the importance of visitation and indeed a wider willingness to encourage it.

More importantly it will contribute to the formulation of visitation strategies of parents to their children, which will lead to effective family re-unification.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS:

It is hypothesised that:

- Parental visits to their children form the foundation for family re-unification.
- Continued contact between the child and his biological family is the single most important factor relating to whether the child remains in foster care.
- Proper consultation with biological parents and children before the process of removal can have a positive effect on family re-unification.

The question is asked;

- What effect does non-visitation have on the child and biological parents and what bearing does it have on the family re-unification process?

The researcher, together with the participants, looked at the strategies to be utilised to ensure effective and qualitative visitation patterns that will be of positive value to family re-unification.

2.8 ETHICAL ISSUES:

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to develop ways in which to improve the management of family re-unification services in foster placement. The practitioners in the field of foster care supervision are accountable to the community they serve in respect of the quality of service they render, especially now that the Department of Social Service has launched its service standards. The practitioners in this field are therefore obliged to adhere to those standards.

Because it is important for the researcher to somehow respect the interests of the child and the two sets of both parents, the following questions arose during the study:

- Is the researcher ever obligated to disclose anything regarding the research findings to the foster and/or biological parents?
- How should the right to privacy of the child be dealt with, as opposed to the consent from the parents? For example, how should conflicts arising between the child trying to exercise autonomy and privacy, and the parent exercising some control measures over the child be dealt with?

Participants were made aware of the purpose of the study and of the researcher's expectations. The principle of confidentiality was practised so that the participants could

feel free to divulge personal information. Pseudo names were allowed so as to ensure the principle of confidentiality referred to above.

The researcher came to the conclusion that it was of utmost importance to ensure that the children's rights and needs be protected.

The research problem has been identified as well as the aims of the study. The next chapter will be a review of literature.

University of Cape Town

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW:

INTRODUCTION:

In this chapter literature concerning different aspects of foster care placement are reviewed. A general overview of the reasons for foster care and what it really means to be a foster parent and a foster child, will be discussed. The South African and cultural perspective of foster care will also be discussed in this chapter.

3.1 LITERATURE DEALING WITH THE REASON FOR FOSTER CARE:

Although all of the known facts on child protection point to the adoption of a child who can no longer stay with his biological parents as the most desirable goal, circumstances often require that foster care should be offered as a temporary means of alleviating crises. The purpose is twofold: to protect the child against "child-related difficulties", e.g. neglect, abuse, abandonment, financial constraints, resentment, rejection, etc. and to provide an opportunity for the parents (who often suffer from an acute depressive reaction) to work out a solution to this conflict about the child. This is referred to as "parental related difficulties".

" Children enter care for a variety of reasons: most of the young for nurture, shelter or protection; most adolescents for control. The young children usually enter care because of a breakdown in family support, either because of parental illness, deficiency or their unwillingness and inability to care" (Millham; Bullock; Hosie & Little: 2). Shirley Jenkins and Elaine Norman (1975:13-14) concur with the above statement.

Fanshel and Shinn (1978:10) state that children who require placement away from their own families today tend to come largely from families where social disorganisation or personality disorders of parents are so severe as to affect their ability to provide adequate parental care, thus bringing about the need for placement. It is clear that these problems interfere with the child's normal development prior to removal from his home and frequently result in injuries to his emotional well-being, which require corrective treatment. It has become necessary to provide for treatment of the emotional problems of the child, which involves help to their parents with problems associated with

impaired parental functioning, in order to assure the child the best opportunity for healthy personality development.

3.2 PROBLEMS WITHIN FOSTER CARE:

1. VISITATION PROBLEMS:

Of all the aspects of foster care, one of the most controversial and generally unsatisfying is the visiting of children by their biological parents (S. Jenkins and E. Norman: 65). Fanshel and Shinn (1978:85) state that the matter of parental visitation has tended to receive limited attention as a research topic. Both authors had occasion to witness the dismay and acute pain, caused by the failure of their parents to visit children. "Anyone who has observed this phenomenon soon becomes appreciative of the emotional turmoil often experienced by the unvisited youngster" (1978:85).

It has to be acknowledged that the social isolation which handicaps many children who stay in care for a long time is a direct result of the care experience itself. This statement is supported by Millham, Bullock, Hosie & Little (1995:3). They found that the problems of maintaining links between biological parents and children in foster care, showed that some children long in care experience extreme isolation from parents, wider family and home neighbourhood and that they showed a marked inability to forge any compensatory relationships. The problem of maintaining links between absent child and parent is multi-dimensional and stems from the legal, social and economic powerlessness of parents and the instability and turbulence of their households as well as from the ideology and organisation of social services and the management of the separation by these services.

On a child's entry into care, the social worker has to decide where the child should be placed, what the implications of the legal status are, how long the child is likely to be away and what kinds of access arrangements should be made for parents. Managing a crisis and finding a suitable placement while coping with the anxiety, grief and frequent hostility of parents and children, make it difficult for social workers to give the maintenance of links between parents and absent children high priority. The arrangement of contact is left to emerge, as a consequence of other social work decisions. As a result, links with the home wither, which impacts negatively on many children in care, and causes them to experience difficulty in maintaining contact with their parents.

The barriers that they face are of twofold: -

- Specific restrictions, which are placed by social workers on the access of individuals, usually family or other household members.
- Non-specific restrictions, which are difficulties inherent in placement, such as hostility and inaccessibility.

These hindrances affect two-thirds of the children in the early days of care. Eloff (1987:45) through the British Guide to Fostering Practise, says visits, which take place under the constant watchful eye of the social worker or foster parent, are hardly conducive to maintaining natural, spontaneous relationships, although there may be parents who are likely to be so damaging to their children that they cannot be allowed to see them alone. Another problem cited by Eloff is that "difficult situations may arise where parents visit in an inconsistent fashion, sometimes making unrealistic promises about future visits or about making a home for a child to return to, which are subsequently never fulfilled"(1987:45). One way to resolve this is to examine the meaning of contact for all concerned. It is usually possible to help foster parents to understand and accept the feelings of parents, which underlie their difficult behaviour, and to help parents understand the child's needs for reliability and consistency.

3.3 WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FOSTER PARENT:

Foster parents and social workers are two groups of earnest people who are engaged in the supreme task of bringing up other people's children. Dorothy Hutchinson (1974: 87) is of the opinion that to bring up someone else's child is a great deal harder than to bring up your own. She states, "Your own child is your own. You take him for better or worse. You have the assurance and the comfort of kinship that no one can take from you". Bringing up someone else's child is different and more difficult. With him you do not even begin with those basic assurances that you have with your own child. "You take him, the foster child, already made, the way he is. You are not responsible for the way he is but you have to live now with the way he is. You don't take him for better or worse as you do your own child but for "better", that is, you take him in the hope that he will get better through you and your efforts and your love. Then you frequently take a foster child already grown to a certain age". (1974: 88). He comes to you, in other words, in a flash, with a full-blown set of habits, ways of behaving and decisive attitudes towards grown-ups.

Loffel, cited by Gannon (1988:45), also supported this view and claimed that foster care is made difficult due to the fact that "the foster parent is expected to fulfil the role of parents but without all the rights of parents and with the knowledge that they may lose the child sometime in the future"

Child placement is a constant witness to children who are being exploited emotionally by deficient and unhappy parents. Such a background for everyday work calls for a high degree of objectivity and control of one's feelings. The worker herself needs to be un-conflicted about highly disquieting subjects such as sex, marital relations, and separation of children from parents. A worker who compulsively believes in the child's own family at all costs and under any circumstances will have difficulty in seeing when separation is beneficial. She will also find it difficult to help a parent with separation when this is necessary. Hutchinson (1974:46) argues that the worker who consciously or unconsciously feels she is "stealing babies" from parents cannot help an unmarried mother give up her child for adoption. She goes on to say that there was a time when the worker in the care field was called a "baby snatcher." This was expressive of a too ready willingness to take children away from their own homes. This was followed by a counter-movement, which almost prohibited the worker from separating children and parents at all or made her feel guilty when she did so. Hutchinson states " The skill of the present consists, first, in the workers knowing when separation is needed and possible and, second, in feeling free and un-conflicted in handling this with both child and parent. The caseworker's expertness is more than a body of knowledge and more than a mastery of method. It involves having come to terms with the less civilised aspects of life and a comfortable acceptance of all manner of transgressions" (1974:46).

3.4 WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FOSTER CHILD:

So many times the child has already been "separated" from his parents by rejection. One could say that he has previously been a " foster child " in his own family. The actual physical separation usually comes to him as the unwelcome climax of a long series of traumatic and misunderstood events. Too often it is the confirmation of his worst fears about his own undesirability and the badness of his parents. Separation is spoken of as an "uprooting" experience and a "breaking" of family ties.

Fanshell and Shinn (1978: 15) also supported this view and claimed that "a placed child, who becomes extremely afraid of yet another rejection by someone he loves, may either try to stop loving, by keeping everyone at an emotional distance, or may be involved constantly in rejecting people first...Instead of attempting to provoke from others treatment reminiscent of his pleasant past, the child may attempt to provoke behaviour that repeats his painful past."

Dorothy Hutchinson (1978:63-66) states. " Maybe some day a child will come along and will be able to tell us in his own language just what it means to be a foster child". She sees a foster child as one who is usually:

- An unhappy child, timid and unsure of him or herself.
- A bewildered child who does not understand what has happened to him/her and what this means.
- A bad child by his/her own judgement. Whereas he/she excuses his/her parents, he/she practically never excuses himself/herself.
- An angry child. To be let down by one's parents, to be disappointed by them, to be embarrassed by them are all mortifying, fear producing and angering.
- A child who feels guilty.
- A child who feels that he/she is "inferior" goods. Sometimes foster children feel that they are unattractive, dumb, and even defective.
- A child who is usually fearful and anxious. He/she is afraid of the present and for the future. The future to him/her is an unknown quantity and into it rushes all kinds of questions (1978:64).

Hutchison reminds us that in child placement one does not work only with the child but also with adults. Often the work with the parents will condition what can be done with the child. She enumerates and discusses some of the kinds of feelings common to the parents, namely:

- The parents usually feel guilty about placing their children. To do this is to desert them and to do so publicly.
- The biological parent of the foster child usually feels afraid, and hostile. He, like the child, consciously or unconsciously fears punishment for what he is doing. He may be mad at himself; disgusted and resentful at the "deal" life has given him.
- The natural parent is usually a person in conflict, divided between guilt and fear; between hurt pride and anger; between sorrow and desperation.

After having pointed out the feelings of the child and the parent, Hutchinson sums up her emphasis on parent-child relationships by saying that with an understanding of such relationships we have a key, which unlocks the answers to many pertinent questions such as:

- Can this child be placed with a reasonable expectation of success?
- Under which conditions can this child be placed?
- What kind of foster home can be expected to succeed with this child and with his or her parents?
- What kind of role should the caseworker play to both the parent and the child?
- Is foster family care the best solution or would institutional care have a better chance of succeeding?
- Shall we work towards temporary or more permanent separation? (Ibid)

"Separation of child and parent is frequently not something we bring about but something which took place long before we entered the scene. In other words, most foster children were already separated psychologically before we were asked to place them." (1974:66) David Fanshell and Shinn fully support this statement (1978:10).

3.5 OTHER RELEVANT STUDIES:

Foster care is a temporary living arrangement for children, which offers an interim environment for normal development and provides the structure necessary for the child to mature. Failure to restore children to their own homes contradicts the concept of foster care.

Parental visiting plays a major role in foster care placement situations. Parental visiting is thus viewed as highly important for the welfare of the children. Juliet Berry (1975:43) supports this statement that the amount of contact between parents and their children in care is of vital importance to the children and can also be a comfort to the staff sharing their responsibilities.

Jenkins and Norman (1975:65) reports that children may enter care because of physical or mental illness with accompanying institutionalisation of parents, so that with the best will in the world mothers simply are not able to visit. On the other hand, mothers may want to visit, but may do so sporadically and in a way that may be disturbing to both the child and foster parents. Visitation patterns are influenced by the reason for placement. Jenkins and Norman (1975:66) concur with this argument as they state "frequency of

visiting was related to the type of placement, with the least visiting occurring when children were in foster homes."

Fanshell and Shinn (1978) found a significant association between parental visiting and the discharge of children from foster care. In their study they discovered that "for the first year subjects whose parents visited the maximum permitted by the agency or who visited frequently but irregularly were almost twice as likely to be discharged eventually as those not visited at all or only minimally". Sixty six percent of children whose parents engaged in no visiting were still in foster care five years after their entry (1978:96). Separation is, thus, experienced as catastrophic or as sad and an unpleasant occurrence.

"The strength of relationship between visiting and discharge is impressive and demonstrates the centrality of visiting as a key element in the return of foster children to their homes."

Eloff (1987:20) maintains: " Parental absence refers to lack of consistent contact between parent and child over a period of time. The parent may have left the area years ago, and his present location is unknown. Or the parents may reappear from time to time and even make sporadic efforts to build a home for the child, but they generally drift away before restoration of the child can be achieved."

"Maintenance of contact with the natural parents only seems to become a problem when the child is left in foster care for an extended period or where the parents have failed so seriously in their parental role, that there is doubt from the onset about the advisability of returning the child to parents who may again seriously neglect or abuse him. In cases where the return of the child to the natural parents form part of the restorative action, where such a return is envisaged within a month or within a longer period, maintenance of contact between a child and his parents is regarded as essential to keep the bond between the child and the parent alive" (Eloff 1987:74).

3.6 THE SOUTH AFRICAN AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF FOSTER CARE:

The concept of foster care is new in theory but it was practised long ago especially in underdeveloped communities in South Africa where children were cared for and placed in un-official foster care with either grandparents or other relatives or concerned neighbours or members of the community. The only difference is that the related families or concerned neighbours used to arrange for the alternative placement of a child in need of care without using the legal system. There used to be no financial implications attached to such placements, as they were a mere illustration of humanity.

The driving force behind foster placement in the African community is **ubuntu**, and the Guguletu area where the sample of this research is based, is no different. Most of the foster parents' motives are based on these values of **ubuntu**. "Valuing the differences between people relates and implies the need to develop the kind of culture in which differences between people can be understood and appreciated" (Group Dynamics:25). Ubuntu, simply expressed, means that no man is an island. To cite the Xhosa proverb: Umntu ngumntu ngabantu, which simply means a person, is a person through other people

3.6.1 CHANGES IN CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS IN AFRICAN SOCIETY:

Within the context of the broader theoretical framework of this study, it is important to identify the two distinct types of African society, i.e. the *traditional* and the *modern*. Traditional African society refers to society which adheres to the norms and traditions which were prevalent in that society before any contact with Western and other alien cultures, while modern African society refers to society after such societies had come into contact with Western and other cultures. The importance of this distinction lies in the different relationships that prevail in the two societies. For instance, whereas in the traditional African society kinship was the basis of social organisation and primary relationships predominated, in the latter society the cooperation becomes the basis of social organisation with secondary relationships predominating.

In the specific area of child care in traditional society, it is a commonly acknowledged fact that such care was the primary task of the family of procreation, the extended family, and in fact, the entire community in a village. Relatives or even neighbours used to arrange for an alternative placement of children when parents were unable to care for them without any state intervention.

It is generally agreed that the transition from traditional to modern societies in Africa was made following contact with Eastern and Western cultures, a process, which ended in colonialism, and apartheid in the particular case of South Africa (Mazrui, 1986). Although the imposition of colonialism and in particular, Western culture brought about changes in the structures and functions in many traditional societal institutions, being the nucleus of society, the changes in the institutions of the family have been the most visible (Amoateng, 1997; Steyn. 1991).

The relaxation and eventually abolition of apartheid restrictions and regulations, especially influx control, has resulted in the migration of young single mothers from the country into the towns and cities in search of a better life. Cut off from the extended family in rural areas and faced with limited social and economic opportunities, these families are experiencing all sorts of challenges, not least of which is childcare. The economic pressures facing these families in turn create other psychological and emotional problems such as alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution and child abuse and neglect.

The growing problem of child abuse and neglect in black and other poor communities has forced the government, through a constitutional mandate, to intervene in the form of foster care.

3.6.2 SAFETY STARTS WITH THE SPIRIT OF "UBUNTU":

Ubuntu stresses qualities, which are familiar to First World psychologists, qualities such as warmth, empathy, unconditional positive regard and a shared world view. It emphasises co-operation as opposed to competition and sharing as opposed to dominating. The breakdown of the concept ubuntu is:

U= Uncover; unravel; open up; explain every action.

B= Build, relationships, form bridges to interact with one another.

U= Understand people's behaviour, be open and communicate honestly.

N= Network; negotiate; spread your wings; listen; ask; don't be narrow-minded; investigate resource.

T= Transform; change your mindset; try new ideas.

U= Utilise; create new opportunities; know your people and use people for what they're worth.

Families have disintegrated because of a number of factors. The culture and spirit of concern and a high regard for children, and for one another, have been destroyed. Children and families increasingly live in isolation and there is a general hesitancy about becoming "involved" in the affairs of neighbours, even if such involvement could save a life. This is a great tragedy for African children in particular, since their greatest guardians have always included people outside the family. One social worker said: "I personally come from such a background where my home was always full of children, people and strangers who had nowhere to go or no one to turn to for their education and needs."

The spirit of caring for others does however still exist. If the efforts of many individuals in the community were brought together to improve the quality of children, we would end up with a very different community, a caring community. It is the collaborative vision and efforts of different people who make a conscious decision to put children first in whatever they do that makes a caring community. People who work with children complain about the difficulty of working in a "developmental" way with impoverished communities. A group of parents in Guguletu who were interviewed around the issue of 'ubuntu' highlighted the fact that caring is a cultural value and has little to do with economy. One supervisor supported the above statement and said, "I believe that my experience in working with poor communities, and the way I was brought up, have taught me that caring comes from the heart; caring is a virtue, a value and it has little to do with material means". That is why you will find poor people who will open their doors to hungry children and needy families and share with them whatever little they have. That is why there are day care centres for children, which do not receive any financial support from the State, where caregivers go every day and look after other peoples' children or children are brought to their homes without remuneration. This is the spirit of ubuntu. It is evident that 'ubuntu' cannot be bought and it cannot be faked; it exists in the minds and the hearts of the people. It is one of the greatest strengths and resources that people have. Having money is a plus, because it makes a lot of things possible and easy, but not having it does not stop people from caring for children and for one another.

An old lady amongst the group of Guguletu people who were interviewed around the issue of 'ubuntu' shared her experience with us and said: -

"In the black community a child is everyone's responsibility. To cite an example of the above statement, a location in King William's Town called Mount Coke Mission, where I was born and bred, gave a piece of land to people who were innocent victims of forceful removals and political violence. Among them were many children who were left without parents and a roof to cover their heads. One of the most striking things that happened was that residents of this location took in children without asking any questions. People's homes were packed with people. In some households there were close to 20 people, including children who would have had nowhere else to go and no one to turn to, were it not for the spirit of caring, -of ubuntu - that prevailed in that community. Those children and indeed the whole community, were doubtlessly traumatised by what happened, but the resilience and caring that occurred left me filled with hope and a high regard for human nature. No children were reported parentless and nobody applied for foster care placement or a foster care grant".

The Guguletu community underwent the same agony during the apartheid regime and often responded in the same way.

Today, however, there are greater difficulties in the community because the spirit of ubuntu is fast disappearing, owing to a number of factors. Nonetheless, there are still people and groups who care. Ubuntu is still a virtue and ubuntu promotes positive outcomes for children.

Professionals frequently know little about the people they are supposed to serve. We have a tendency of looking at the material deprivation of people, and of making assumptions about their abilities, capabilities and disabilities and concluding that because they don't have infrastructure they are somehow deficient in other ways as well. It is obvious that, regardless of their circumstances, people do cope with their conditions; they have their ways of rearing children and resolving family disputes. It is just as obvious that their ways are not in the books we have to study in the academic institutions. In the past professionals have often had a colonial attitude and have taken people's practises and strengths - their traditions and cultural heritage - from them and entrenched dominant western beliefs and practises. Programmes for the communities are still being developed without bothering to check whether they are culturally acceptable to the people concerned or whether they enhance the capacities the people have. People have inherent abilities and potential capabilities which need to be deepened. We can learn from them, build on what they do and, thus, show that ubuntu exists. If we believe that

people know something before we get to them, we can "deepen" rather than "build" their capacity.

The researcher believes that we should uncover and identify the feelings and the acts of goodwill that prevail and use them as strengths for the protection of our children. This could radicalise the way the government funds programmes for children; it would acknowledge and make use of what already exists - "what people are already committed to" - instead of starting new initiatives which have no connections with what already exists.

I would like to pose the following questions to all those who work with the community:

- How often do we listen to the voices of the elders in so far as child-rearing is concerned?
- How often do we recognise that people's culture is their strength and that we need to learn from them?
- How often do we incorporate people's cultural practices and appropriate cultural problem-solving strategies into programmes?

I will conclude this section about ubuntu by reiterating that all the efforts mentioned is a way of adhering to an African belief: "It takes a whole village to raise a child".

At present only the remnants of ubuntu remain. The gradual disappearance of this philosophy can be attributed to colonialism, macro and micro economic tendencies, apartheid, and other forces that stripped and eroded the spirit of ubuntu, especially in urban areas. The present-day lack of ubuntu can also be attributed to certain economic factors. The high rate of unemployment has left people with no means of support, which makes them unable to assist others.

Despite the socio-economic state of the country there are, however, still people out there who adhere to the practice of the humane values and morals of ubuntu.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: PART 1

4.1 PERCEPTIONS OF FOSTER CHILDREN, FOSTER PARENTS AND BIOLOGICAL PARENTS:

INTRODUCTION:

The foster children, foster parents and biological parents who contributed to this study were allowed to represent and reconstruct their own realities and experiences. This approach empowered those who were weak, vulnerable, and hopeless to express and analyse their experiences of neglect and rejection, and to look closely at their problems, priorities and hopes. It is their voices that speak through this chapter.

This chapter gives voice to those who are marginalized and excluded, especially children. The question that arises is whether what is expressed in this chapter and what is now known, will lead to change. Will it bring about change to what really happens in the ground, to what touches people and their lives in the sector of foster care placement? This will depend on the commitment of service providers, government and the community.

4.1.1 VIEWS OF FOSTER CHILDREN:

The following table reflects children's feelings and experiences on being removed from their parents and breaks their responses down into numbers and percentages. The 50 children in this study were between ages of ten and eighteen (pre-adolescent and adolescent stage- 21 boys and 29 girls). Their stay in foster care ranges from seventeen to five years.

TABLE 1

DOMINANT FEELINGS	NO.OF CHILDREN	PERCENTAGE
Fearful	5	10%
Angry	9	18%
Confused	10	20%
Nothing	12	24%
No response	2	4%
Low selfesteem	8	16%
Sad	4	8%
TOTAL	50	100%

The above table indicates that most children were just numb and were not in touch with their feelings anymore. Some

children displayed anger and low self-esteem. In discussion it became clear that a combination of complicated feelings co-exists in these children, but many said that they could not see the point of expressing their feelings as they felt the exercise would accomplish nothing and would only remind them of the pain they were trying to forget. A question arises; why do these children, being moved into foster placement, move so quickly to detachment, without demonstrating the stages of protest, despair, and depression found in other common separation experiences? A basic condition for the free expression of feelings is the child's ability to admit them to consciousness. Sally Palmer has found that foster children often cannot do this, because, "losing parents and being moved to a strange place by strange people may be so overwhelming to a child that she has to deny her feelings"(1995:46). It is evident that unknown people and strange surroundings frighten young children especially when both conditions exist together. "Children who are being placed usually have low self-esteem, arising from unreliable or abusive parenting and the low status of their families in the larger community. Low self-esteem will cause these children to doubt the validity of their feelings. Furthermore, past experiences will have taught them that they have little power to influence their environment. They will see no point in expressing their feelings directly; this will accomplish nothing and only make them increasingly aware of their own pain"(1995:46).

All these influences tend to push children into premature detachment from their feelings about separation, and they bury their ambivalent reactions of yearning for and anger towards their parents. One consequence is that these unresolved feelings prevent them from placing trust in new adults such as foster parents.

In the research sample 20% of the children were confused, as they reported that they did not really know what was happening and couldn't understand why they had been removed from their parents. At the same time they were angry at their parents who allowed them to be taken away from what they valued most, i.e. to have a parent, and angry to be let down and disappointed by them. They were excluded from the decision-making process that affected their future.

Very few of the children, in fact, the lowest percentage, expressed sad feelings. At the same time those who did not respond verbally nonetheless communicated "sad" feelings in silence, they were crying and appeared to be far away in their thoughts. It was evident from their non-verbal body language and behaviour that the whole exercise brought back painful, distressing and bad memories. From those who

verbalised their sad feelings it came out clearly that they were in dire need of their parents, no matter what; they wanted clarity on the reasons for their removal; they wanted to confront their parents constructively so that they can reconcile for the purpose of re-union. Hereunder are examples of each of the reactions:

- *"I felt very sad as I was leaving my mother and siblings. I was supportive towards my mother who didn't have a place to stay. We used to sleep under the bridge. I used to watch my mother struggling, trying to make ends meet, to the extent of begging. We were eating from rubbish bins. I refused to attend school as I was giving some form of support to my mother. Our plight was reported to social workers by my maternal aunt with whom I was eventually placed. Questions that were in my mind were: what would my mother do without my assistance; where and with whom will my siblings be placed."*

Another child said:

- *"I didn't want to be removed, as I had mixed feelings of sadness and fearfulness. I didn't know what the future would hold for me in a new place. No matter how hard and painful the circumstances I was experiencing under the iron hand of my own mother, I preferred to stay with her. To me I was already separated from her although I was still under her roof"*

Again Sally Palmer found that these feelings were common among the children she studied; "Children who have lived with their families since birth will usually accept their home conditions - whatever they may be - as normal" (1995:44). Cole supports the above statement and says. "All (child protection workers) who have been involved when children are removed from a home have witnessed how youngsters cling even to abusing parents and have seen children run away from adequate foster homes to inadequate parental homes" (Cole: 1984). Hutchinson aligns herself with the other writers: "One of the most strange and yet characteristic things about a foster child is his clinging to his own parents, his loyalty to them no matter how bad or unkind they have been to him" (1968:89).

The above-discussed feelings take us to how the feelings relate to the reasons for placement and alienation from parents. The reasons for the removal resulted in very specific feelings in the children and seemed to be very much the same in all the individuals who were moved for a given reason.

TABLE 2

REASONS OF REMOVAL	FEELINGS
Abandonment	Angry, & Confused
Neglect	Angry, Confused & Ashamed
Abuse	Angry, Confused, Numb, Blameful, Empty, Low self-esteem, & hopeless
Deceased parents	Sad, Fearful
Mental and or Physical illness of parents	Fearful, reluctant to move, sorry
Financial constraints	Didn't want separation, Sad, Fearful
Homeless	Reluctant to go, Sad, Sorry

Table 2 indicates two sets of reasons for removal and different reactions to those situations. Jenkins and Norman refer to them as "socially accepted" reasons and "socially disapproved" reasons. The latter can be identified as abandonment, neglect and abuse, the former as deceased parents, mental and physical illness of parents, unsatisfactory financial conditions and homelessness. These reasons are suggestive in the sense that the "socially accepted" are reasons beyond the parent's control; the "socially disapproved" are man-made and one can have control over them. No circumstances can condone a parent's abandonment, neglect and abuse of his own child.

Table 2 also indicates that children who were separated from their parents because of socially accepted reasons felt sad and feared the unknown. (As indicated in Table 1 children with such feelings did not wish to be separated from their parents and should have been given a chance to ventilate their feeling.) Those who were removed due to socially disapproved reasons shared combinations of complicated feelings, ranging from anger to numbness.

The reason for removal has an influence when it comes to contact of these children with their parents. This matter will be discussed later.

4.1.2 PREPARATION OF CHILDREN PRIOR TO SEPARATION:

The table below indicates whether children in foster care were informed or not about their removal and also whether they were given a chance to ventilate their feelings.

TABLE 3

REASONS FOR REMOVAL	INFORMED	VENTILATION OF FEELINGS
Neglect	No	No
Abandonment	No	No
Abuse	No	No
Deceased Parents	(1) Can't recall (2) Yes	(1) Can't recall (2) No
No place of abode	Yes	No
Inadequate finances	Yes	NO

It is evident from the table above that children whose removal was necessitated by socially disapproved reasons were never informed of why they were separated from their parents, nor given a chance to ventilate their feelings. This kind of action can be attributed to the fact that childcare services tend to be called upon at times of crises when intervention is a matter of urgency. On the other hand I am not encouraging this approach as children have a right to know and fully understand what is taking place, especially in matters concerning their lives. Sally Palmer concurs with the above, she states, "children's awareness of their family background and why they are in care are important aspects of self-knowledge and the latter has been identified as contributing to good adjustment and to placement success"(1995:68). "Research with adults has shown that bad events of their childhood were less important to them than their ability to come to terms with those events"(Main et al, 1985). Report of Committee of Inquiry into foster care states "the child is not adequately prepared for placement and cannot understand why he has been removed, why he has been placed with a specific family, or what the expected duration and purpose of his placement will be. When removal or restoration must occur, the child is not consulted and prepared for it" (1990:31).

Most of these children had mixed feelings. Though they were angry with their parents, and felt confused and empty, they felt relieved to be rescued from unbearable events that were

totally outside their control. At the same time they expressed a need to be re-united with their parents. This point will be discussed later.

Some children who were removed due to socially accepted reasons were informed of their removal, others could not remember, as they were still very young at the time of the removal. None of them however ever had an opportunity for expression or ventilation of their feelings. There were those who did not want to be separated from their parents. As much as they wanted to verbalise their unwillingness, they were afraid to talk. One child even said, "Even if that chance was available to me I wouldn't have talked, as the social worker was always in a hurry when talking to us, it was as if she didn't have time to sit down and listen." Hutchinson concurs with what this child says. "No child will let an adult in on his inner secrets unless he senses that this person is for him and wants to understand him as a real person" (1974:30). It is evident that too little weight has been given to learning from the child, to hearing what the child has to say and to being guided by him.

One child, whose mother died, shared her painful story in the group. She does not know her parents, her mother died when she was still young (she was told). What she knows is that an unknown person or people placed her in the custody of strangers. She never experienced happiness or pleasure in that "horrible home"; she was always left alone and locked in a room without food for the whole day. She was only allowed to eat when the other children come back from school. She was denied education; time to play; visits; or even the opportunity of talking to the foster parent's children. During weekends when everybody was at home she would be instructed to do all household chores although she was only eight years old. (At the time of the research she was 11). She then said:

- *"I couldn't care less when the social workers did not inform me of the fact that they were removing me. I didn't need to know who told them about my situation, or where they were taking me, as long as I was rescued from that family. But now that I am settled I want to know more about my background: what did I do to those people to deserve such treatment? Where is my father? Is he also dead, and if not, where does he think his child is?"*

This child's story suggests the following:

- Some social workers rarely do supervision services.
- Children may be subjected to secondary trauma, which might be more painful than the primary one.

- Foster parents may sometimes be benefiting from a child's presence, and may be practising child labour under the guise of helping a child.
- No matter how painful a child's past is; he/she still needs to know about it.

All these feelings illustrated above call for effective communication with children especially those who have been subjected to traumatic and or depriving circumstances. It requires sensitivity and consideration for the child and a certain measure of courage to reach out and help those children to take the first step in communication. Social workers and all those involved in working with children must realise that by putting the interests and well-being of children first, they would be giving practical recognition to the fact that they are the seed-corn of the future. Their development determines the fabric of tomorrow's society. Hutchinson supports this statement. She urges social workers to set practical goals; to know what can and cannot be done, so that they can interpret "to a host of others that a child's present is the future of us all" (1978:16).

4.1.3 CONTACT WITH BIOLOGICAL FAMILY:

In our discussion with children it was possible to explore the subject of their contact with biological family members in some detail. Contact was made in different ways, since people can stay in touch by mail, telephone as well as by visits. It is also possible for the child to keep in contact with many different members of their biological family.

An indication of which family members the child would prefer to be visited by and how often, is illustrated in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Number of children-50

WHO MUST VISIT	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Both Parents	-	-
Mother	26	52%
Father	3	6%
Siblings	10	20%
Nobody	1	2%
Whole family except mother	2	4%
Not sure	5	10%
No response	3	6%

It is clear from the above table that the largest portion, or 52%, of the foster children wished to have or maintain contact with their mothers. None indicated a wish for contact with both parents. This, then, reflects that most households are female headed with single mothers trying to contain their children within a family setting. Because they are single working mothers they had to opt for substitute care for their children. About this issue Pringle says: "Working mothers must seek some substitute care, but the choice available is limited" (1988:9). Siblings represented the second largest group, to which foster children are closest in their family of origin and 20% of the group indicated their siblings. This indicates that these children, who were disappointed and let down by their own mothers, have and are clinging to the only hope they have, i.e. they still have each other as siblings. Foster parents with the assistance of social workers must be encouraged to play a helping role in enforcing and maintaining such contact.

In the sample of fifty children there were only five children who were not sure of who must visit them and only three who did not respond. The 10% who were not sure didn't have any recollection of their parents due to their age when they were removed. These were some of their comments "Bringing them into our lives now, what good is that going to serve?" "I am better off without them, but I still want to know why they decided to give me away." The last statement suggests that foster children are experiencing an "approach avoidance" conflict. Part of them do not want to have anything to do with their parents; at the same time they need them for the purpose of seeking knowledge about their past. To give children some sense of control over their lives, parents should tell them the truth about why they are being moved, and share everything they know about future plans. It was also discovered that some of these children lose hope, to the extent of cutting ties with their parents. One child uttered the following words: "*Family has no meaning to me*". Throughout the group discussion this child was angry, far away in thoughts, not respectful, manipulative and sometimes disruptive. When she shared her feelings about her family she became tearful and became cooperative. Palmer affirms this child's reaction, "The less information an adolescent has about his family members, the more likely he is to try to create them; a youth will often 'act out' destructively in a way which reflects the few facts he may have about his hidden or lost parents, or even worse, on the basis of his fantasies about the lost object" (Palmer 1995). Towards the end of the session she appeared relieved. When asked by other children, "why the sudden change?" she smiled gently and said "Now that I have been

given a chance to air my feelings and have people to really listen to me, I am relieved, and I will be at peace with myself for the first time in so many years". This again suggests that children can feel that analysing and expressing their feelings give them power in the situation i.e. that feelings are valid, and that expressing them may have some impact on others.

What happened to this child suggests strongly the power of sharing. It is evident that children may gain power by participating in support groups with others in similar circumstances. In such groups children can discuss feelings they had never revealed to their workers, foster parents and even to their own parents.

4.1.4 TYPE OF CONTACT CHILDREN WOULD LIKE TO KEEP WITH THEIR PARENTS:

As indicated in the preceding table most children indicated clearly that they need to maintain contact with their parents, yet the types of contact differ from child to child. Not only the type of contact was assessed but also the reason for choosing it and its frequency. All these variables are given in the following table.

TABLE 5

TYPE OF CONTACT DESIRED	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	FREQUENCY DESIRED
Personal	41	- Yearly - Monthly - Regularly
Letter	5	Monthly
Telephone	2	Fortnightly
No contact	2	

It has been evident from the above table that almost all the children in foster care are longing for their families of origin. From talking to them it became clear that they need contact for different reasons. What is common for 82% of the children is that they do need personal contact. It is clear that the reasons for removal have an influence on the reasons for contact. Those who were removed for their challenging behaviour wanted to reconcile with their parents, they needed to tell them why they behaved the way they did. This probably indicates that parents were also seeking reasons for their children's behaviour. Where the reason was neglect and abandonment, children wanted to confront their parents to get clarity on what necessitated their actions. Some wanted to know their parents' identity as they never knew nor saw their parents. One child made every effort to trace her parents with the assistance of her

foster parent. Everything they did proved futile, as the mother deliberately never responded. The mother kept making unfulfilled promises. When visited she would deliberately not open the door. Her daughter was a few months old when abandoned in hospital. After all the effort to have the child placed with either the maternal or paternal family failed, she was placed in foster care. She was only six months old when the court inquiry was finalised. At the time of the research she was eighteen years old.

This child said she did not want to be re-united with her biological mother, nor her reputed father; all she wanted was to see them, to be able to put faces to their names. She further said she was not happy at all to be using her mother's surname. As far as she was concerned she was Mazozo, her foster mother's surname (pseudo name). To quote her verbatim:

"I know no other family but my foster family. I have even taken their clan-name, their customs and rituals are also mine".

Literature also reflects this reaction: "Unvisited children seemed more dependent on their parents than visited children. This process is understandable as physical and emotional distancing promotes rather than weakens psychological dependency" (Palmer 1995:61).

Of those who wanted contact by mail, 10% had ambivalent feelings. But it came out clearly that in general they were not ready for personal contact, but envisaged wanting to meet their parents at a later stage (personal contact). The same feeling applied to those who wanted telephone contact; they were not sure how they would react when hearing the voices of their parents. This suggests that foster children need to be gradually re-introduced to their parents. They thus need some time to get to know them through gradual contact with them, until a bond between them has been rebuilt.

- Maintenance of contact with biological parents over years, even if it tends to create problems with the child and the foster parents, can go a long way in helping the child come to grips with his own life situation.
- Maintenance of contact with the natural parents can also serve to counteract feelings of desertion and abandonment that children experience when they are separated from their parents at an early age without being re-united with them.

It must be borne in mind that the most vulnerable children are the least likely to express their feelings directly.

Children, who do not have any comments, are of great concern because they seem unable to analyse and express their feelings and will, therefore, find it more difficult to come to terms with the situation.

Children in care must maintain ties with their biological families if they are to best counter the effects of separation from those families and maintain continuity in their lives. Children in care need their social workers and foster parents to have an open approach, in terms of acknowledging their pain, providing information about their past, and encouraging them to talk about their families.

Palmer confirms the reaction of these children to contact with their families: "Visiting reassures children of their parent's affection, allows them to question their parents about the reasons for placement, and probably minimises discrepancies in the explanations that the children receive from their parents, social workers and foster parents. All these influences are likely to reduce the children's sense of being rejected or abandoned, easing their re-incorporation back into their homes and families" (Palmer, 1995:80).

Children themselves are advocating that they need to become gradually re-acquainted with their parents so as to be able to rebuild the child-parent relationship, to strengthen the loose bond between them and ultimately to be re-united with their families. This was evident in their preference regarding the frequency of contact in table 5.

The feelings and opinions of the few children who seemed not to be ready to have any form of contact, and of those who had totally cut ties with their parents, need to be respected. Eloff supports this statement by quoting Kahn et al: "Access to a child is only likely to be refused to a parent where he or she is likely to seriously harm the child's development". Even children who are unlikely to be re-united with their parents need workers and foster parents to help them resolve issues about their biological family ties, otherwise the children's lives are likely to be complicated by feelings of loss, abandonment, rejection and guilt.

4.1.5 CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF VISITATION WHILE IN PLACEMENT:

Various sorts of feelings came to the surface in the children's statements and comments about visits. Conclusions about this aspect are drawn from the statements made. Although these children indicated their wish to maintain contact with their families, the mother's visiting behaviour

nevertheless impacted significantly on how they reacted to the visit.

SOME COMMENTS AND STATEMENTS

"I am the only one who makes an effort to visit my mother, she never visited me. Her attitude makes me feel bad, and I always ask myself what is it that I did to my mother? I decided to stop visiting."

"I don't know what to say, my parents never visited me. They abandoned me in hospital. To me that is a sign of rejection. I know who they are (i.e. their names) and where they stay but I never see them. My mother always makes promises to the social workers but she never fulfils them. She does not honour appointments; she is deliberately unavailable. The only reason why I want to make contact with her is to know my roots. I don't need her in my life."

"Whenever I visit my mother she swears at me; calls me names; blames me for her husband's imprisonment (cause of removal incest). Neighbours are siding with my mother. Visiting home is a drawback to me. It brings back bad memories. Sometimes I think of killing myself but thankfully my foster mother succeeded in talking me out of those thoughts."

"I am happy where I am, but I really miss my mother. I would like her to visit me, but she won't be able to do so as she is unemployed and has no fixed place of abode. I'd appreciate it if she could be assisted to visit me once or twice a year and to stay with us for two weeks. My foster mother will approve of such a visit"

"My foster mother does not allow me or my mother to visit. She always talks negatively about my mother. I am afraid to approach her about or talk about visiting my mother. As a result I keep quiet and pretend that all is well. I suffer in silence".

The committee of inquiry supports the above statement and say "Foster parents do not always understand the purpose of contact between foster children and their biological parents" (1990:37)

Most of the other children were nodding their heads in agreement with what their fellow foster children were saying. This means they have the same experiences and feelings.

The comments made by the foster children suggest that there are very limited visits by the parents to their children.

Parents make promises they do not keep. These broken promises are disturbing the development of children in foster care. Jenkins and Norman (1975: 65-66) support this statement: "Mothers may want to visit, but sporadically and in a way that may be disturbing to both the child and foster parents". "Parental absence refers to lack of consistent contact between parent and child over a period of time". The committee of inquiry supports the above and say "Often the parents do not keep promises which they have made to their children because they are unrealistic, or because they do not bother to keep them. This causes disappointment, heartache and confusion for the child" (1990:37). Many parents seem to reappear from time to time, but then generally drift away before restoration of the child to its family can be achieved. "Parents are often unreliable about keeping appointments" (Palmer, 1995:104). This is really heartbreaking and hard to accept for children. Some have become suicidal, others get lost in the system while others are thankful to their foster parents who rescued them from appalling conditions. Social workers must seriously consider the seriousness and the meaning of visitation in foster care service.

Two patterns of visitation emerged, and these were linked to whether the reasons for removal were socially accepted or not. In the first instance it also came out clearly that some children have understood and accepted their removal. They wish to have regular contact with their parents but because of unsatisfactory circumstances in their own homes they are happy to be living with foster parents. These children were close to their mothers before the removal despite the unfavourable circumstances, and as a result they did not want to be separated from them although they understood why it was necessary. This suggests that children who were parented in their families are likely to feel guilty about leaving their parents and to go on alone.

The researcher observed that the behaviour of some parents towards their children was disturbing and also brought back bad memories for the children. This is suggestive that in certain situations unpredictable and inconsistent contact may prove to be harmful and destructive, and some parent's behaviour so disruptive as to be intolerable for the child and foster parent. If the mental balance of the child is in such a delicate balance that contact with the natural parents can cause a serious set-back in his development, the child should be protected from such an experience until he is, with the help of therapy, able to face the parents, supported by his social worker and or foster parent.

4.1.6 CHILDREN'S EXPECTATIONS FROM NATURAL PARENTS, FOSTER PARENTS AND SOCIAL WORKERS:

The needs and rights of children need to be taken seriously and their dignity should be acknowledged, especially by those who are involved in working with children. It should be kept in mind that today's children are tomorrow's citizens.

During the group discussion with children they shared with the researcher the manner in which they wanted to be listened to so that adults would hear what they have to say. They wanted their own opinions to be taken seriously in matters that involved their lives. Hutchinson believes that too little weight has been given to learning from children themselves. The researcher has thus given these children an opportunity to talk and display the profound working of their minds.

4.1.6.1 EXPECTATIONS FROM BIOLOGICAL PARENTS:

The children want the following from their biological parents:

- unconditional love.
- a willingness from them to start playing a parental role towards their children.
- the provision of information about family background.
- an answer to the question: What is it that they did that deserved them to be abandoned, neglected, and abused?
- involvement in decision-making, especially in matters that concern them.
- acceptance of the status quo: (One child said, "My mother must accept the fact that I can never stay with her ever again".)
- nothing at all: (One other child said, "I don't expect anything from her".)

If they only knew who their mothers were, they also wanted:

- a display of motherly love,
- information on who their fathers are.

I would like to narrate the wish expressed by one of the children - She wishes to become a nurse and to practise her nursing in a hospital where her mother would be hospitalised. She would give her mother special treatment; nurture her until she got better. She would then ask: "Do you know the nurse who is taking care of you?" The answer would definitely be " I don't know her". She says, she would then reveal to her who she was "I am that child who you deserted at Red Cross Hospital, the child whose future you

never bothered about. I am Nomonde (fictitious name), your own daughter, and your own flesh and blood. Mama, I don't hate you for what you did to me, I have forgiven you but I don't want to stay with you because I know no other parent besides my foster parent."

It is obvious from these expectations that children in foster care are, in most instances:

- longing to be re-united with their families.
- need to be made aware of their family background to enable them to understand why they are not staying with their parents.
- want information from their parents, even though it might be upsetting to learn about family problems.

It was evident that those who did not receive information appeared to interpret "no news" as "bad news". Palmer states that children who lack knowledge of their backgrounds are at a disadvantage when questioned by their peers (1995:69).

Their comments also proved that they had unanswered questions, and therefore expressed curiosity about their families, although they had never previously asked anyone about them. Earlier it was pointed out that they sometimes have difficulty asking questions about their parents. It must be borne in mind that unresolved issues would hinder the child's future development.

It was clear that they wanted their opinions to be considered; they wanted a consultative approach to be used, especially in matters concerning their lives. This shows that children believe they have a right to be listened to and be heard. The involvement of children and youths in making decisions about their lives helps to ensure their commitment to carrying out those decisions. Real communication with children is achieved if an adult intuitively perceives the children's feelings, and manages, in a professional manner, to unlock their emotions by allowing them to express them. According to literature a study of children's case records found little mention of any clinical work to help children in South Africa to come to terms with their family relationships.

It is also possible that social workers withhold information from children to protect them from knowledge that may be painful. In the process, however, they leave children to develop their own accounts. Palmer concurs with the above statement when she says: "Although many children have large gaps in self knowledge about the past, their families and why they are in care, workers and caregivers appear

reluctant to discuss these subjects with children" (1995:109). This leads the researcher to the conclusion that children need to know about their background and their families, to help them accept being in care and to keep them from making negative inferences about themselves. It is never too late for children to hear a full and truthful explanation of the reasons for their separation from their background. Parents can best meet the prerequisite of trust in an adult that enables children to share their feelings.

4.1.6.2 EXPECTATIONS FROM FOSTER PARENTS:

When a child is placed in foster care he brings with him his past behaviour, needs and challenges which were often developed in a disturbed background. When the experience of a traumatic separation from his only known environment is added to this, the child is often left feeling vulnerable and experiencing problems. It also further complicates the task of caring for the child and impedes his development. This child has lots of expectations from the foster parents. In this study the children had the following expectations of foster parents:

- Unconditional love.
- To be treated like normal children and not "foster children".
- The patience to understand that a child needs about half a year to find out if a foster parent cares about them or if they are bothered about them.
- Encouragement of contact between them and their parents.
- A willingness not to prevent children from seeing their parents.
- The kindness not to talk negatively about their parents (such as telling them that their parents were alcoholics).
- Tact, so that they will refrain from reminding them that they were abandoned, abused or without parents.
- The understanding that they come from difficult circumstances and the patience to bear with their resultant erratic behaviour.

Literature supports the needs of foster children mentioned above. The researcher sees these factors as demands made on foster parents, not only by the children, but also by the social workers, the agency, and even by the parents who failed to play their parental role towards their children.

It must be borne in mind by all those involved in child care that foster parenthood is different from biological parenthood and that it is usually in this difference that

the problem areas lie. Foster parents have the day-to-day responsibility for the child's care, they must love and treat him as their own, but must recognise that the child cannot be their own and they must, therefore, eventually be able to give the child up. These basic differences between foster and natural parenthood account for some of numerous demands made on the foster parents and their families.

What emerged is that foster parents are not careful enough when communicating with these children. They keep referring to and reminding them of the reasons for placement in an unwelcoming manner. They also talk negatively about their biological parents. This proves that many foster parents find it difficult to accept the child's biological parents. Because of this the community in which they live will also tend to avoid acknowledging the existence of another family while the youth is in foster care. "Given the lack of acceptance of their parents, it will be difficult for these children to feel accepted by foster parents or the wider society" (Palmer, 1995: 40).

It was said by most of the foster children that foster parents also contribute to the non-visitation by their parents. In support of this finding Palmer comments and advises foster parent to be careful not to abuse the great power they have over the agency. "Workers are likely to accept the foster parent's request for reduced family contact, even against their own judgement, because they are so afraid of losing a foster home and having to replace the child" (Palmer, 1995:53). This proves that social workers and foster mothers can be influential in encouraging and discouraging ongoing family ties. It has been evident from the children's comments that a high degree of tension and competitiveness often exist between parents and foster parents, causing the latter to discourage contact.

It has also been found that foster children realise the difficulty and problems they pose for their foster parents by their testing-out behaviour. In their acknowledgement they plead for patience on the side of their foster parents, for their understanding of where they come from, and of how their experiences had led to the loss of trust in adults. Eloff concurs and says; foster children need time before they may feel comfortable enough to share information with their substitute carers and even with the social workers. "One facet of the foster child's behaviour which makes it especially difficult for the foster parent is his testing-out of the foster parent" (1987:92). The child has to show these feelings and find out that the foster parent will stand them and go on caring for him before he can really believe in her, believe that she will not desert him as he feels he was deserted before. It must also be realised that

this is very hard on foster parents because they are not responsible for what happened to the child before.

Foster parents must be informed of and prepared for this type of reaction. Social workers must, therefore, inform the foster parents beforehand of any behavioural problems the child is likely to show and equip them with skills and guidance in dealing with these problems.

4.1.6.3 THE CHILDREN'S EXPECTATIONS OF SOCIAL WORKERS:

A social worker is responsible for managing the parent-child separation in a manner that is sensitive to the child's psychological readiness and that incorporates as much environmental support as possible. Attention to the child's psychological readiness involves ensuring that the parents have verbally prepared the child for separation. If this is impossible then the social worker must do compensatory work. Building a supportive environment involves reducing strangeness by making sure that children have familiar transitional objects, and arranging pre-placement visits, parental accompaniment, and regular contact. It is also the worker's task to help parents deal with their own feelings about placement, so that they can then help their children. If this is not done parents who feel discouraged or guilty about placing their children may behave in ways that undermine placement.

An opportunity was given to the children to state their expectations from social workers and to tell whether their expectations were being met.

They expected of and demanded from social workers that they would:

- involve them when deciding about their future plans.
- make sure that foster children are not subjected to secondary trauma by being observant and taking serious note of sign and body language.
- not always listen to and believe what the foster parents say and that they would make sure that they stick to their promises, in other words, that they practise what they preach.
- not disappear after the placement, as this is the most difficult period of adjustment and adaptation to a strange environment with strange or unknown people.
- have a definite contract with the foster and biological parents especially in terms of the maintenance of contact between them and their parents.
- assist them in tracing their parents, if necessary.

- find work and accommodation for their parents so that they will be able to re-unite and be a family again.

Only three children had different expectations. They said social workers must not make any effort to re-unite them with their parents. One of them said: "Do social workers and all those in control ever ask the question **how long does it hurt?**" A social worker who was participating in this research responded by sharing with them her experience, which was similar to theirs.

She said she does not know who she was, and was still trying to find answers that her estranged parents were refusing to reveal. She then broke down and cried. As tears were rolling down her face these children comforted her. This was a sad moment. The children sang a very touching song which goes like (this song is interpreted in English as it was sung in Xhosa) "We wonder what we have done that we suffer so much; what have we done to you, our parents to deserve rejection, emotional, psychological and physical abuse". And then they said one day that question will be answered and their parents will answer to God for what they have put them through.

This session with the children suggested that children in foster care were very concerned about themselves and what their parents have done and were doing. Foster parents elicit very little concern.

CHILDREN'S CONCERNS ABOUT THEMSELVES

It emerged clearly that some foster children are subjected to secondary trauma, and thus live in fear and pain. They are experiencing difficulty in openly expressing or reporting their agony for fear that it would make matters even worse, as they are the ones who have to live with the foster parents for twenty four hours, while social workers are not always there.

It was evident that they had expressed some of their fears, agony, pain and feelings non-verbally to social workers but that no notice was taken of their sign and body language. This suggests that social workers and all those working with children need to be sensitive to any unspoken signs and signals from the child that may be her way of communicating to the social worker that she is in an unhappy situation and wishes to be helped.

It became clear that little or no consultation exists with the children as to how they feel and what their opinions are about removal from their parents and placement in a totally

new environment. Children in care are pleading to service providers to involve them in decision-making processes that directly affect their future. As was stated earlier on, we need to listen to our children and hear what they have to say and allow ourselves to learn from them.

Lack of supervision services emerged as an important issue right through these discussions. Social workers are often seen in the foster home on the day of the Children's Court Inquiry, and will then disappear. She will be seen again when the time for the Regulation 15 report comes. At that time she will report on what the foster parent tells her, without having rendered any service to the child or to his parents. This kind of practice raises some questions in my mind:

- How can the system be improved to be more fair to the child and her parents?
- How can the impact of being placed in care be softened for the child?
- How can working conditions be improved to allow the social worker to listen to her conscience and to what it is telling her?

Jean Charnley who says: "Hastily she would give the foster mother some practical suggestion like starting the placement off with a good hot bath and shampoo", supports this finding. "Then she would be off and on her way to "save" another child. There was no evaluation of what the child was feeling about his own parents, no preparation for placement; and the concept of a supportive relationship to help a bewildered child was unknown" (1961:74).

If the social worker fails to give active, constructive assistance at this early critical stage, the child may lose faith in the social worker and the foster parent may question both the quality and quantity of help, which he can expect from social workers and the Welfare Organisation.

Children in care are in dire need of knowledge about their historical background. It is clear that many children in care have large gaps in self-knowledge about their families and why they are in care. It has been found that the power of group cohesion can relieve one's inner feelings. This was evident when some children empathised and comforted a participant who shared with them her experience, which was similar to theirs. It has been found that foster children are often very resilient and that is their strength that needs to be deepened. Social workers should focus on and utilise the "strength-based approach" when trying to help children in distress. "It may well be that some are endowed

with inner strengths which enable them to grow up healthily in their feelings as well as their bodies, despite experiences which stunt the growth of others." (Someone Else's Child: Stevenson: 95).

CHILDREN'S CONCERNS ABOUT THEIR PARENTS:

The children raised the issue of a contractual agreement between foster parents and biological parents. This suggests that foster children are longing for family restoration. It came out that no such contracts are drawn up; hence there is a plea for social workers to make sure that such contracts are drawn up with their clients. What the children said also suggests that they believe that both natural parent and foster parents will abide by such a binding agreement, which will later be beneficial to them.

It has been evident that very little is done by social workers as far as family re-unification services are concerned. From the focus groups it seems as if the children themselves are making an effort, under difficult circumstances, towards their return to their parents or family of origin because those in authority rarely do it. There might be some reasons that bar social workers from rendering this vital service. We will discuss that later.

Some children know and understand the reason for their removal and accept the placement, but, for the most part, even they want to be re-united with their parents. They therefore expect social workers to find work and accommodation for their parents so that they can be together and enjoy being a family again.

It has been evident on the other hand that not every child in placement wants to be re-united with his family of origin. They have learnt the hard way to accept foster homes as their own and the foster family as their own family. They have grown to love, respect, honour and cherish their foster parents (though this trust may have taken a long time to develop) as they have received love and respect from them. Hence one child said her foster family's surname, clan-name, rituals and customs are now hers. For such children there is a need for permanency planning. I, the researcher, take my hat off to such foster parents who have such great hearts and high concern for children.

Social workers need to acknowledge, recognise and commend such foster parents, not only on an individual basis but also in foster parent group meetings. This manner of acknowledgement will not only encourage those foster parents, but will also instil a sense of commitment in other

foster parents. It will inspire others, including the social workers, to also work in the interest of the foster children.

Social workers must also recognise that children in care can probably never completely belong to a new family, as it is important for them to have contact with people to whom they are tied through blood. Palmer concurs with the above statement and states: "Youths in care do not belong to the foster carers in the same way the carer's children do" (1995:41).

In conclusion it is evident that children want:

- to be respected
- their own voices to be heard
- as much information as possible on their background
- most of them want to be re-united with their parents
- contracts to be drawn up between the two sets of parents
- a great deal of empathy from their foster parents

It was also evident that children;

- Become extremely sad if they have no contact with their biological parents and that
- Support groups consisting of groups of foster children are extremely valuable.

4.2 PERCEPTIONS EXPRESSED BY PARENTS:

4.2.1 FOSTER PARENTS:

Foster parents are supposed to be in touch with the biological parents of children they care for, but discussions held with both the foster parents and children revealed that quite a small number of the foster parents adhere to that principle. Looking after someone else's child is a very delicate matter and rouses many complicated feelings on both sides. There may be situations in which children are better off without parental contact. However, whether or not children see their parents, the attitude of foster parents towards the natural parents is important for the psychological well-being of the foster child. When they do see their parents, children need to be able to share the impact of that experience with foster parents. The foster parent's feelings about this aspect of the care situation were thus explored by the research. The following were the findings:

Foster parents get tired of having other people's feelings and attitudes explained to them for they have a right to their own concerns and they need from time to time to think about themselves in relation to this task of fostering. They also felt that taking a foster child could make a great difference to them as the foster parents and to their family lives; in all sorts of ways, some enriching, some disturbing.

It is hard for foster parents to understand why natural parents should find fault with a foster parent, who had taken care of their children whom they were not able to or failed to care for themselves. One foster parent said, she thought that if the mother had really wanted to take care of her children, she would have found a way to do it, using the old expression 'Where there's a will there is a way'. Another foster mother complained that the natural parents had the 'cake and candy' part of child care during weekend home visits, whereas she was left with the day-to-day discipline of managing of her foster child.

Foster parents' inability to accept 'bad parents' who cannot care for their own children is one of the basic attitudes that should be considered when placing children.

Foster mothers expressed frustration and emotional strain when some foster children failed to respond warmly to the care and affection they provided. This kind of feeling has a negative impact on a child as the foster mother's anger is channelled sometimes wrongly. These mothers may also become discouraged in the process and that could end in breakdown of the foster placement. Hutchinson supports this statement

and says, "these foster children seem ungrateful to us and it can be discouraging" (1974:90).

It was found that to be a foster parent is to experience dissatisfactions and then again, satisfactions. This was displayed when some foster parents said; " It is really fulfilling to see a child gradually lose his fear. What could be greater? To see a child begin to be able to love, what could be more satisfying? To see a child gain confidence with other children, what could mean more?" Other foster parents felt dissatisfaction with the service they were rendering to these children. Four factors were mentioned:

- Letting a child go - acknowledging that little children grow up and part of growing up is growing away from us.
 - Sharing a loved child with his parents, especially those you don't approve of.
 - Living with the ungratefulness of children.
 - Ironing out one problem and then having new ones crop up.
- These are the kinds of things that are found to make the foster parent's job a hard one, but I believe that all things that are worthwhile are hard.

Most of the foster parents had certain inclinations, which they find hard to resist although it complicates the relationship with the child. These are:

The inclination to feel that they are bad or the child is bad if he doesn't improve right away. Some foster children just will not gain weight or develop an appetite. Foster parents said this happens despite the care they give. They find this situation hard and they blame themselves or the child for it.

The inclination to tell the child he can't stay with them if he doesn't behave in certain ways. The child would often have heard the same thing from his own parents. It tends to make him afraid all over again and to feel that he is unwelcome and so undesirable that nobody wants him after all.

The inclination to do the job alone. Most foster parents said they were tempted to share only the good things with the worker: the successes and real achievements. They deny themselves the help which they would have received from sharing the hard things and failures with the worker. One of the children's expectations, earlier on, were highlighted as, 'Social workers must not only listen to what foster parents are telling them but they must follow up and check if what is preached is practised.'

The inclination to be overly successful. Some foster parents are afraid to fail the child, the social worker, the agency

and the community. This proves the fact that you take a foster child together with his parents, relatives, and service providers who come in and out of your home.

Hutchinson concurs with the above and states: "You take the foster child along with a worker, in other words you not only share him with a parent but with the agency. Your own child is your own; the foster child belongs to other people too. Finally, to take a foster child is to become publicised, so to speak. The foster parent, as well as the foster child, is frequently an object of neighbourhood curiosity, admiration and gossip" (1974:88). Eloff also concurs with the above, stating, "The foster parents have the day-by-day responsibility for the child's care, they must love and treat him as their own, but must recognise that he cannot be their own and must therefore be able to give the child up" (1987:91).

Social workers should realise and acknowledge the hard task carried by the foster parents and the demands put on them. They must assist the foster parents in maintaining harmonious relationships with the natural parents, to avoid conflict with the parents and to understand and help the child with any conflict of loyalties between foster parents and own parents that may occur. Foster parents often need special help throughout the placement to understand the importance of the child's continuing relationship with his own parents. In cases where there are strained relationships between foster and natural parents, the social worker should take the responsibility for guiding the contact between them, and making other arrangements. Counselling the foster family on how to handle the visits may benefit all the parties involved.

4.2.2 NATURAL PARENTS:

The natural parents' feelings about the removal of their children from their care were explored. It is worth mentioning that very little response was received from natural parents. Those who were present were not articulate regarding their feelings, but the researcher could deduce certain feelings from their non-verbal language. Findings on this issue were thus based on the few who verbalised their feelings, and on the process reports and process notes made by social workers in their case files.

It has been a finding of this research that families whose children enter care often live in non-supportive environments and have been marginalized by society. As a result, they are likely to feel alienated from society and antagonistic toward authority figures, including social workers, that handle the placement of their children. The

loss of their children is likely to increase their sense of inadequacy, powerlessness, and societal stigmatisation.

It was evident from the discussions held with the few mothers who were present that those who were identified as neglecting or abusing their children were angry at the agency. Mothers from the lowest socio-economic group in this study viewed the agency as aggravating their problems, and felt that their social workers were disinterested and unhelpful (this fact also came up from the discussion with children). Underlying this parental anger are feelings of failure, despondency, and guilt about having their children in foster care. A biological mother described a range of painful feelings, including her sense that the foster parent's positive remarks about how well her children were doing were an implied criticism of the care she had given her child.

It was found that parents are afraid to work towards their children's return for fear they might fail again. In particular they often felt discouraged by the socio-economic gap between themselves and the foster parents, feeling that they could not offer their children the opportunities given to them in the placement. During the group discussion one mother responded to specific questions about her feelings about visiting her child in foster placement. She said that she was afraid that she was no good as a mother - the fact that her son had been taken away from her by the court made this worse. She was afraid that her son would not really want to see her. She was afraid to visit him if she could not take him anything, like sweets, because she felt she didn't have enough inside herself to give him as a mother. At first she just said she would not visit, and then she made excuses, and in the end she says she would go on Sunday, which, she didn't.

It was discovered that feelings of anger and discouragement may not be expressed openly, but rather transformed into passive resistance towards social workers and foster parents. Passivity is probably the most common reaction to placement; parents withdraw from the agency, and thereby from contact with their children. It is understandable that parents may be reluctant to visit their children; the foster parents are strangers, who may disapprove of them; the most tangible task of their job as parents has been lost, and they have few guidelines for the visiting relationship. One parent said the social workers never gave her a chance to state her side of the story when her child was taken away from her. She was not even told where her child had been taken to, let alone the visiting arrangements.

Parents feel diminished by comments from social workers and foster parents, that reflect on them as parents. Even the reassurance that their children are happy may be interpreted as an unfavourable comparison between the parental home and the foster parent home.

When children are admitted to agency care, one parent said, they are often completely displaced in their children's lives by social workers and foster parents. Yet they do not expect agencies to assume almost total responsibility for their children. Parents reported feeling betrayed when they requested agency help, and social workers then used compulsion to have their parental rights set aside. They thus felt unwanted by the social workers and foster parents. Another parent said when their children were taken into care compulsorily, they, as parents, had a sense of being pushed aside and losing their parental responsibility.

Intervening in families must be done with great care to avoid actions that could weaken the natural family system, sap its vitality and strength or cause costly adjustment. In working with families beset by destructive environments, it is important to identify family strengths; and to make the assumption that

- families are good rather than bad for children, and that they are
- competent but constrained instead of incompetent and pathological.

The development of a mutual support group for biological and foster parents is one new and positive response to difficulties experienced by these parents. The opportunity to share experiences with others is particularly important for families who find it difficult to talk openly with workers because they are alienated by the worker's authority. Meeting with other parents of children in care provides parents with an outlet for their strong feelings and can be a source of support for their efforts towards reunification with their children.

4.2.3 EXCLUSION OF PARENTS FROM FOSTER CARE:

In this study almost every parent indicated that they were not told where their children were being taken and hardly any parent accompanied their children into care. Parents feel left out or excluded from discussions about future plans for their children.

It has thus been found that parents with this feeling of exclusion respond by acting in the way the authorities appear to wish; they may leave the child to the powerful authority figures and drop out of the child's life, seeing no part that they can play, and fearing that in any contest for approval and affection from their children the scales will already be heavily loaded against them. In such cases the parents may remain in the child's life adopting a negative attitude to all plans made by the social workers and creating maximum trouble and difficulty for foster parents.

Exclusive fostering favours containment of children within the foster family and excluding them from other connections. Three empirical studies found that 50% to 63% of foster parents regarded the children as their own and 35% to 56% thought that biological parents should not be encouraged to visit their children in care (Palmer: 1995:82).

Exclusive foster parents tend to measure their success by the degree to which they can replace the child's family: they often vigorously oppose family visiting, claiming that it upsets the child. "It is difficult for social workers to deal with foster parents who are opposed to visiting, because that opposition may be denied, externalised, or projected onto others" (Wald et al.1988).

The effects of an exclusive approach have a negative bearing on both the child and his parent. An exclusive approach makes it difficult for children to integrate their past and present lives. Exclusive foster parents tend to deny the importance of the child's past, wishing to emphasise the present. Social workers' visits, parental contact, or children's questions about their "other" lives represent a threat, because they contradict the accepted view at home, i.e. that the child is part of the foster family.

Although exclusive fostering is contra-indicated by theory and practise principles, it tends to persist.

Ongoing family contact is discouraged by restrictive visiting arrangements in which biological families are prevented from going to foster homes or having their children come home overnight. Instead, they are limited to visiting in the social worker's office during working hours. According to the British Guide to Fostering Practise, visits which take place under the constant watchful eye of the social worker or foster parent, are hardly conducive to maintaining natural, spontaneous relationships. In arranging visits, workers and agencies tend to give precedence to the routines of foster parents, rather than those of the family. Parents tend to be left out of planning for their children

in care. They often do not understand the legal implications of agency custody; are excluded, for the most part, from planning meetings, and receive little or no written confirmation of decisions. Workers tend to minimise the importance of parents in their general approach to foster care. Contact with own families after placement is often allowed to lapse, and little or no support is given to parental visiting, hence the long stay of children in foster placement against their will.

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CHAPTER 5

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS: PART 2

INTRODUCTION:

Wynberg Child Welfare Society social workers, in the foster care supervision section, were interviewed using the interviewing schedule. An audiotape was used to capture everything that transpired during the sessions held with them. Among the 10 social workers there was a supervisor. The same methods were used in interviewing the Wynberg Court commissioner of Child Welfare.

The researcher's purpose with the above exercise was to explore the service providers' perception of foster care.

5.1 VIEWS OF SERVICE PROVIDERS:

1. VIEWS OF SOCIAL WORKERS:

The process of separating children from their families can leave workers emotionally burdened by the loss and grief felt by the parents and children. Although there seems to be no published empirical studies of workers' feelings, the gap between accepted theory and practice suggests that workers approach the separation process with discomfort and uncertainty.

In a group discussion with social workers they were requested to express their feelings about removing children from their families.

Some workers reported the children's feelings of anxiety or self-blame, but mentioned no attempt by themselves to explore or otherwise respond to these feelings. This ties in with what was reported by children that no one ever asked them how they felt nor informed them why they were being removed; in other words there was no consultation with them at all. As one child said: "you are told what to do, your task is to respond to the instruction".

Workers expressed their hesitance to elicit painful feelings. Workers often lack knowledge and skills necessary for responding to foster children's separation conflict. They expressed their sense of inadequacy; they were aware of children's needs, but were not confident about discussing separation.

One worker expressed a feeling of uncertainty about discussing a child's 'missing' mother with him/her.

The Kanjela children aged seven and ten respective, did not mention their mother to their worker for several months after their admission to care. The worker reported, "I find I'm anxious about mentioning 'mother' and I do not know in which context to do it. Should I arrange a visit or wait for the court hearing? How do they feel about their mother leaving them? Do they realise their mother has left them? These are the kinds of questions I'm asking myself, and I don't know how to mention the subject to them"

Another worker expressed similar uncertainty:

She was working with Sizeka, nine years old, and reported her as needing to express her very pent-up, very repressed feelings about her separation experience. She said, "I think she is letting go of her old illusions, but she is still repressing all her feelings because they are extremely painful". The worker expressed self-doubt about her ability to help Sizeka with her feelings. "In terms of non verbal communication, I haven't done too much myself.. I haven't done play therapy or role play at all". Consequently she took the role of an observer, saying, "I really haven't intervened with Sizeka, but I'm sort of picking up the clues".

Both workers were conscious of their limitations, which is a good sign. The question that arises is: do they get support from the department or agency about their shortcomings?

Workers expressed **concern** about children's separation feelings, but did not take the next step of trying to help them understand and accept their past. This indicates the worker's sensitivity to children's feelings and failure to act on their understanding. This can be attributed to a number of reasons: workers may feel overburdened or they may be defending against their own feelings or they may fear eliciting reactions that might upset the placement.

One worker said that he was very concerned about the risk the child was exposed to and the abuse and neglect he has suffered. He went on saying, "Sometimes you ask yourself, are you doing that child a favour.... We are saving him from

that risk by finding the most suitable placement; but if I imagine myself taking children to a completely strange family, to a strange or unknown environment, it blows my mind" Some workers feel **bad** about the hasty decisions taken in removing children from their parents. Almost all the participants complained about the external factors that sometimes force them to have the child placed in substitute care without conducting an in-depth investigation. External factors mentioned are the referring agencies, especially the hospitals, that will pressurise social workers for substitute care for a child who is ready to be discharged. The child will often have been hospitalised for severe malnutrition and will never have been visited by his parents since admission. The argument of the hospital would be that the child is blocking the bed of a sick child. Without proper investigations statutory intervention will take place. This hasty decision forced on social workers results in the misplacement of children, which often eventually results in placement breakdown.

Another worker commented: "People are in too much of a hurry about family reunification taking the child back too soon, when the problems have not really been solved; this once again exposes the child to the atmosphere of abuse".

In this way eagerness for family reunification tends to expose the child to yet another possibility of abuse. In such cases one wonders if this does not happen because of the placement breakdown, which causes the social worker to hastily think of uniting the child with the parents despite the fact that the reasons for removal may often not have been resolved. This could be exacerbated by the fact that there is no bank of foster parents (prospective foster parents) readily available, and returning the child to his parents is an easy way out. This action leaves the social workers worried and frustrated and once again indicates that there is a lack of supervision and family re-unification services.

They are **afraid for their safety**: Another factor, which was strongly emphasized, was lack of safety of social workers while executing their duty. Several examples of the hazards faced by social workers were mentioned. In one instance it was discovered that children were being subjected to secondary trauma and the foster care grant was not used for the benefit of the children, but instead were being abused by the foster family. Because of this placement breakdown the children had to be removed in terms of Sect 36 (1) of the Child Care Act (emergency removal). During this process a social worker was nearly strangled by the foster mother's son. One worker was shot in the office during an interview

and he died instantly, while another one was shot dead in the course of duty in Khayelitsha delivering blind clients.

It is a reality that social workers are working under difficult, risky and dangerous circumstances. Their work requires physical courage as well as a tender heart and a tough mind.

When children keep on running from placements and returning to their parents (i.e. from the painful, sad, pathetic circumstances he was removed from) social workers become frustrated. This again proves that children cling to their parents no matter how abusive they may be. The social workers' frustration stems from the **scarcity of resources**; (no pool of foster parents) and not enough children's homes; also from **limited time** to concentrate on one case for a reasonable time.

2. CONSULTATION WITH BIOLOGICAL PARENTS PRIOR TO REMOVAL AND PLACEMENT:

HEAVY CASELOADS: A concern expressed by social workers throughout the discussion was that of not being able to intervene in the case in the manner they would like to due to being overloaded. One member expressed an opinion that high caseloads led to superficial intervention since social workers did not have the time to do their work thoroughly. Another supported that argument saying social workers are equipped to deal with presented problems but they do not have time to adequately apply those skills. Still expressing dissatisfaction with the heavy caseload one said " If our caseloads can be lowered we would have more quality time with our clients".

A particular concern of two supervisors from different agencies was that, as a result of high caseloads, social workers were not able to maintain regular supervision of foster placements and so were unable to anticipate a crisis. Another respondent shared similar views and queried the social worker's ability to detect problems at an early stage and render the necessary preventative services because of the heavy workload. This view was also pointed out by some of the foster children who said they last saw social workers at the time of the Children's Court Inquiry. Foster parents agreed on this.

The early detection of problems is hindered by the foster parent's inability to report the problem, fearing that the child might be taken away from her and she'll be seen as a failure. It is also hindered by the social worker's high caseload.

One social worker expressed the frustration that they are dealing with most placements as emergencies rather than taking time to find an appropriate home and giving children a pre-placement visit and a parental accompaniment to a new home. This suggests that parents and even the children are more often not consulted. Reasons given by workers for moving children without consultation refer to the feelings of adults and to the worker's time constraints. Reginald O. York (1998:28) refers to this as "squeaking wheel" planning. This is attributed to the pressure put on social workers by the referring agencies and by the six weeks stipulated period to finalise a Children's Court Inquiry. (This was mentioned, earlier on, as a frustrating factor by social workers.) As for time constraints, several workers independently told the researcher, that they had no time to conduct placements according to recommended principles. They seemed to feel that the limits on their time and resources forced them to work in a responsive rather than in a proactive mode.

Another reason given by social workers for not adequately consulting with parents was the **unavailability of parents**. They often said: "The children's families may be difficult to trace". One worker mentioned the fact that more often than not parents who abandon their children are doing it deliberately and will leave false information about their own names and their addresses.

Shortage of staff was also given as a contributory factor to non-consultation of parents. One worker said, "For the whole of the Gugulethu area there is only one social worker who is doing intervention i.e. starting the case from investigation level up to the finalisation stage (holding of C.C.I.) Supervision services are rendered by only two social workers. This situation also applies to the Nyanga area. Shortage of staff ties up with time constraints and burn out.

At the end of the day innocent children become victims and suffer the consequences of the factors mentioned above. Their parents have failed them and subsequently they become trapped in the bureaucracy of the agency. Because of the department's failure to take into consideration the interests of their employees, children have to pay the price. On the other hand parents are often partly to blame for the worker's actions as far as consultation is concerned.

3. INCLUSION OF PARENTS IN PRE-PLACEMENT OF THEIR CHILDREN:

A question of whether building a relationship between foster parents and natural parents is essential prior to removal and placement of the child, was posed to the participating social workers. A number of responses coincided with the answers given on the issue of consultation with natural parents.

Most social workers responded positively to the question, saying parents should be guided to take as much responsibility for constructive participation in the child's placement as they are able to carry. Others said, "It is possible and will be a good thing to do". Others said, "It is an ideal thing, but there are many factors that prevent us from applying it."

The last two responses suggest the need for natural parents, foster parents and children to meet prior to removal and placement. The reasons given why this ideal approach was not practised were:

- Natural parents are unknown; those that are known are often untraceable.
- Some parents are non-co-operative and do not keep appointments.
- Heavy caseloads.
- Staff shortage.
- Social workers are working in a crisis situation mode.

Reasons given above further explain why, under these circumstances, it is not possible to build the natural-foster parent relationship prior to removal and placement.

The exclusion of parents in the removal of their children makes it difficult for the children to integrate their past and present lives. This leads to confusion and identity crises on the side of the children.

The advantages of arranging for the natural family and the foster family to meet beforehand cannot be over-emphasized;

- The child can use the placement experience with maximum benefit if he knows that the parents have made or agreed to this plan for him, based upon concern for his welfare.

- Prior meetings between the parents, the child and the foster parents allow for direct discussion about the child's particular needs and idiosyncracies.
- Such meetings provide an excellent opportunity to exchange important documents of the child, i.e. his identity documents, certificates of inoculations, school reports, etc.
- Through contact with his parents, and through direct interaction with the child, the foster parents begin to know him and in turn become familiar figures to the child.

This suggests that there should be an introduction between the child and the foster family before the actual placement. The opportunity to know more about the foster family through meeting them beforehand is a suitable way of easing the moment of placement itself

If an introductory visit can take place at the foster home, a child will be more reassured that his parents know where he is, and the parents themselves will have a more realistic view of the people who will be caring for their child, where he will live and how he will be looked after.

Palmer supports the above statement and says; " A pattern of co-operation between the child's two homes can be established from the onset by including parents in pre-placement visits" (1995:95).

4. FACTORS THAT DELAY FAMILY RE-UNIFICATION:

As stipulated in the Child Care Act, the duration of foster placement is two years, hence their placement is said to be a temporary measure while parents are assisted to apply more of their energy to the resolving of problems that prevent them from functioning as well-adjusted adults and as parents to their children. (It is worth mentioning the fact that the stipulated period referred to above varies from case to case; it can be less or more than the said period.) A question arises: do children really return to their parents after the expiry of the two-year period? Learning from experience and the opinions of the participants, it does not happen in practice due to various reasons, hence the question, what delays family re-integration?

Hereunder are the reasons given by the social workers as contributory factors to re-unification delay.

One respondent said, "Sometimes parents make appointments with the social worker, the foster parent and with the child but they do not keep it". She further said that it is difficult for everybody to deal with.

A natural parent would convincingly promise to visit her daughter; when the day of the appointment comes, she would not be there. When visited by social workers she would deliberately ignore the knock on the door. When visited during week-ends with the hope of finding her home, it would be noticed that there is somebody home but when social worker approaches the home, windows would be closed and curtains drawn. When spoken to over the phone, she would be a most co-operative lady, with a soft-spoken voice but her actions would be just the opposite.

This is supported by literature; parents are often unreliable about keeping appointments (Palmer: 1995:104). A question was raised by a member of the group, "Is it not that she (the parent) cannot deal with removal herself?" This suggests that parents may present or come across, as non-cooperative but in actual fact the underlying problem is her own inability to deal with the separation. It is, thus, the task of the social worker to help parents deal with their own feelings about placement, so as to make it possible for these parents to help their own children. Otherwise, parents who feel discouraged or guilty about placing their children may behave in ways that undermine the placement. Foster parents were also cited as sometimes delaying the re-unification process. One respondent said, "Sometimes foster parents go out with the children knowing very well that parents will come to visit the child at that time. Some that children are not allowed to have any form of contact with their parents". This indicates that foster parents deliberately deny natural parents access to their children claiming that the visits upset the child. It was voiced that foster parents become negative when the subject of access is broached by biological parents. It is as if the foster parents feel that the children belong to them. This opinion is supported by Holman, "Social work visits, or children's questions about their 'other' lives present a threat, because they contradict the accepted view in the home, i.e. that the child is part of the foster home" (Holman: 1975). Foster parents sometimes instruct foster children to tell lies to the social worker about knowledge of their parents. This suggests that services offered by social workers to the foster mother and the child are based on lies, which makes it difficult for such children to be re-united with their families within a reasonable period. It becomes worse if one thinks that a social worker testified under oath that the report she presented in court contained true information.

A foster child was instructed by the foster parent never to reveal the truth about the identity and whereabouts of her mother to the social workers. She was not allowed to visit her nor was her mother allowed to visit the foster home. Despite that refusal the child was visiting her mother without the knowledge of the foster mother. As the child was not happy in the foster home, somebody who requested to remain anonymous tipped off the social workers. It was only then (after eight years of placement) that social workers started working with the child's natural parent.

The above suggests that foster parent sometimes have a negative attitude towards natural parents. It also proves that they sometimes view children's families as their rivals for the children's affection. They may therefore attempt to undermine family attachments. Success of family re-unification and inclusiveness of parents depend upon openness of foster parents: because children are in their homes, foster parents generally control access to them by social workers and parents.

Social workers also saw themselves as partly contributing to the delay of children's return to their families of origin. Parents who are inconsistent in their visiting discourage social workers. Wishing to protect a child from disappointment, the worker may allow contact to lapse. This may not be the best solution; in view of children's tendency to idealise absent parents, they may view their parents' apparent lack of interest as a reflection of their own unworthiness. Sporadic contact may thus be better than none at all.

One respondent said: Social workers tend to make comparisons of the parental home with the foster home and make assumptions or conclude that the child is better off with the foster parent as she is used to the foster parent's standard of living.

This decision is influenced by the socio-economic gap between natural parents and the foster parents, and the feeling that the natural parent cannot offer their children the opportunities they have in the placement. This argument also came up in the discussions held with both parents and foster parents. A question arises: when there are no proper or adequate family re-unification services rendered, how could this decision be reached?

It emerged that workers are experiencing burnout, not only because of high caseloads but also because of parents who are alienated and who behave in a non co-operative or hostile manner to them. It has been found that such behaviour may cause social workers to lose respect for the parents and consequently to underestimate their continuing importance to their children in care.

Bureaucratic expectations were seen as pulling social workers towards foster parents and children rather than towards the children's parents; some social workers complained about the organisation's preoccupation with bureaucratic requirements e.g. legislation and standards which usually set minimum levels for worker's contact with children, while in practice the level of family contact is actually left to the worker's discretion.

Another complaint referring to bureaucratic constraints was that there is a lot of duplication as far as recording is concerned regarding case records, process notes, process reports and comprehensive reports. Much time is spent on these requirements, rather on the therapeutic needs of the child's family, foster parents and foster children.

Some workers, especially supervisors, disagree with the argument that administrative requirements interfere with the effective family re-unification services on the basis that preventative strategies employed by the social worker usually take place before administrative requirements.

It was agreed that these administrative tasks may seem to be a hindrance and time consuming, however, it is important to carry them out. The process of recording what has transpired between the client and the worker helps the social worker in many ways:

- To think through what is happening and make an assessment.
- To trace the procedures when there are queries.
- To find documented proof if one of the involved parties is not complying with what was agreed upon.

A suggestion was made that reports should be more concise, conveying the essentials.

The participants regarded administrative requirements as a hindrance. However, there are issues of accountability attached to record keeping. It is only through record

keeping that a social worker's productivity can be gauged as well as evaluated.

Most social workers experience record-keeping as time consuming. Other members felt that sitting in an office, meticulously doing paper work, could also serve as an excuse by social workers who feel threatened by emotional issues, and those who do not know what steps to follow next, in other words those who do not want to admit that they do not know how to cope with their work and tend to sweep those cases under the carpet. Who suffers at the end of the day? It is the child in placement. The Department of Social Welfare may want to look at methods of facilitating record-keeping through the latest computer techniques.

It must be borne in mind that in the process of protecting children, parent's strengths and commitment to their children may be undervalued, and their involvement discouraged. Parents can continue to play a meaningful role in their children's lives after placement if workers take care not to push them aside or devalue their importance.

A question posed by one of the social workers in the group was: "In family re-unification, whose needs are we meeting and why do we do that?" This question was left unanswered. It was just agreed that whatever service one is rendering, that question must always ring in one's mind.

Another factor pointed out as delaying family re-unification was that **restrictions are often placed on parental visiting**. One worker said, "Children should have a period of no visiting so that they can adjust to the foster home". This is a debateable issue, as non-visiting may become an obstacle to rebuilding a relationship. After too long a gap there can be no guarantee of adjustment. As one worker said: "After a long gap renewed visiting would be upsetting." Another respondent, in support of the above statement, said, "Parental visits are discouraged in the belief that the lack of visits would allow neglected and abused children to make a fresh start in foster care." All these opinions are only hypothesis that have not been tested. Nonetheless they are the basis for placing restrictions on visits. Research should be done on this issue. During this research children should be given the opportunity to ventilate their feelings.

According to Gibson and Parsloe a study of visiting patterns found that some workers who asked parents not to

visit could not identify what harm they expected from visiting.

Another restriction cited was for **the visits to take place at the worker's office during normal office hours.** Sometimes this approach does not work as both the child's and the natural parents' spontaneous responses will be inhibited. Eloff supports this argument: "Visits which take place under the constant watchful eye of a social worker or foster parent are hardly conducive to maintaining natural, spontaneous relationships" (1987:45). Although there may be parents who are likely to be so damaging to their children that they cannot be allowed to see them alone, these will be in the minority.

A factor which might be contributing to social workers placing restrictions on visits might be the fact that they are dealing with a demanding caseload (as indicated earlier on) and, thus, take the path of the least resistance. This is exacerbated by a tendency to give precedence to the routines of foster parents rather than those of the family when social workers arrange visits. In a nutshell, social workers place insufficient value on parental ties and make too little effort to maintain them.

There is evidence to suggest that children are less disturbed and the placement more successful where they are in touch with natural family, particularly if the contact is consistent and frequent. This is also linked with the child's understanding of their situation both in relation to the foster family and the welfare organisation. On the other hand, the fact cannot be dismissed that difficult situations may arise where parents visit in an inconsistent fashion, sometimes making unrealistic promises about future visits or about making a home for a child to return to, which are subsequently never fulfilled.

Ways to try and solve this problem:

- A social worker can play an enabling role when visits are to be arranged. She does not need to be present throughout, but needs to be available if required. It seems, however, that her presence should be restricted to instances where the child's welfare requires this.
- The meaning of contact for all concerned can be examined. It is usually possible to help foster parents to understand and accept the feelings of parents, which underlie their difficult behaviour and to help parents understand the child's need for reliability and consistency.

Foster Care Grant: It emerged from the discussions that some foster parents' interests are more focused on financial gain than on the child. To support this statement a social worker shared her experience when she was nearly killed in a foster home.

Severe ill treatment of three foster children was anonymously reported to the office. On investigation the allegations were confirmed. It was further discovered that the foster parent's children abused the foster care grant and spent it on alcohol. On the day of payment the table would be full of alcohol (different types), the house would be full of friends, 'skollie types', and from the smell and smoke coming out of the house, it was evident that they were smoking dagga. The foster children were literally without proper clothing: wearing torn and dirty clothes that were tight fitting and too small. The school, where their attendance was reported as irregular also confirmed this. They had no school uniform, nor books and other school necessities. When outings for foster children were organised by the social workers, these children would not be available. Damage control was done by the social workers: managing the grant - buying clothes for the children, starting from scratch, monitoring their school attendance and progress. This action aggravated the ill treatment. This secondary trauma experienced by these children left social workers with no option but to remove them from the foster parent's care. This was when the social worker was nearly killed at the foster home. It was through the assistance of the police that one of the three children was removed. The second child ran away on the day of the removal, but he eventually approached the social workers on his own accord and requested to be removed. It was discovered that the third child was taken to the Eastern Cape by the foster parent without consulting the social worker. The child was removed a few days after the finalisation of the Children's Court Inquiry. It was further revealed that the clothes that she never received, the clothes that were bought and meant for her, were instead given to the foster parent's granddaughter who was the same age as the foster child. The foster parent received the grant for this child, whom she never stayed with nor cared for.

The story above proves that some foster parents may foster these children to fulfil their own selfish interests. In the process the feelings and emotions of the children are damaged. Children get hurt the second time around. Sometimes the second time around becomes worse than the first exposure. The above also indicates that in some cases there are no regular supervision services rendered or no services at all. That is evident in the case of the child who was taken to the Eastern Cape shortly after the finalisation of the Children's Court Inquiry.

If the motives of the foster parents can be thoroughly investigated at screening level, children can be saved from experiencing abuse all over again because when this happens it has a negative impact on the children's trust in adults. They might think that the people they trusted disappointed them and again their last resort for having a sense of belonging is destroyed.

Social workers are partly to blame when foster parents become too dependent on the foster care grant, as social workers sometimes place five to six children in the custody of one foster parent. One social worker admitted to this argument saying, "It is our fault".

A heated argument came up on the issue of the Child Support Grant, which is only R100 for children up to the age of seven as opposed to the R400 which was previously allocated to such children. This meagre amount paid out to natural parents has a negative effect on social workers and on the welfare department as well. It encourages parents to abandon their children which causes them to have to go into placement. This is where false information is provided to the investigating social workers. The lies that are told to foster children about the whereabouts and knowledge of their parents, is the result of the phasing out of the state maintenance grant (SMG) and the phasing in of CSG. Foster care placements are escalating and a high intake rate of foster care grant applications is expected in the year 2002.

Foster children were also perceived as contributing to the family restoration delay. This argument was supported by many social workers who said children do not report the wrongdoings of their foster parents, because they fear that it could compromise their own future safety. Other children are ill treated by their foster parents but those children would not reveal that information to the social workers.

The foster child was severely abused emotionally by the foster parent. A friend literally had to supply everything, starting from food to a school uniform to the child. Whenever supervision services were rendered, a satisfactory report would be received from both the foster parent and the child who would confirm and pretend that all was well. The child's friend, started to feel uneasy about keeping quiet about such painful and heart-breaking information, and eventually revealed the information to the social workers. She pleaded with the social worker not to tell her friend that she was the one who had informed the office.

A supervisor responded by asking a question, "How can they (the foster children) know when they speak to us that we won't go and confront the foster parent and when they go back they would be in greater trouble?"

5. REASONS FOR REMOVAL AS FACTOR WHICH INFLUENCES IN FAMILY RE-UNIFICATION:

It emerged from the participants that factors associated with the return of a child to the care of the parents, centres around three areas, namely:

- The general personality and parenting capacity of the parent.
- The relationship between parent and child.
- The contribution made by the welfare organisation to assist parents during pre and post placement periods.

One worker said the same factors which necessitated the removal of the child from the care of the parents, determine to some extent whether he (the child) will or will not return to their care. These same factors will often influence the parents' ability to overcome the problems that led to the placement in the first place. Palmer concurs with the above statement "So often the very set of parental emotions, illness and limitations that make placement necessary, are the very ones that defeat or make impossible or inexpedient the child's return to his family" (1995:49).

Relevant factors in the parent's personality and parenting capacity were identified as follows:

- The nature of the physical or mental disorder, which affects the parenting ability.
- The willingness and ability of the parent to use resources to overcome the situation, which separate him from the child.

Factors mentioned above indicate the importance of the parents' personalities and their parenting capacity. If circumstances beyond their control or socially accepted reasons caused the removal of their child, the chances that their child can be returned to them are very high.

Parents must display a willingness to accept assistance availed to them, and a willingness to make use of the resources around them. However, these resources are not

always available in their communities. As mentioned earlier in this thesis a lack of resources sometimes delays the family re-unification process. There are more inherent strengths and resources however, which could often be the parent's own personality or could lie in his family or extended family. The social workers and the agency need to realise the strengths of parents and start to focus on the strength-based approach in their practice. Also the concept of extended family must not be ignored; there is a lot of wealth within the extended family in terms of dealing with children.

It was also pointed out by almost every participant that the kind of relationship between the parent and the child prior to placement has a strong bearing on the parents' determination to gain care of the child.

The following phenomena in the parent-child relationship seem to indicate the likelihood that the parent might resume the care of the child.

- Prior experience with the care of the child, especially if the parents have at various stages managed to care for the child adequately.
- A high rate of parental visiting also correlates more positively with the return of the children to the care of the parents rather than no or low visiting rates.

The following phenomena in the parent-child relationship have been found to correlate more negatively with the return of the child to the care of the natural parent.

- The abandonment or desertion of children by parents.
- The neglect or abuse of children by parents.
- Low or no visiting of children by parents.

A social worker related the following experience: she had to remove a child from her family because of sexual abuse. It became difficult for her to think of family re-unification services as the perpetrator was still with the family as he was out on bail. The mother of the child was angry at the social worker, asking her "why do you have to remove my child and not the perpetrator? My child did nothing wrong".

It is obvious from the above that parents believe that their children are suffering double trauma: that of the abuse and that of being removed from their family, the

environment they know, etc. They, the parents, and children themselves, view this removal as a punishment. It is difficult for them to see the logic behind the removal, even when it seems clear to social workers that the removal was necessary for the purpose of healing.

The justice system became a point of contention, and one worker said there were things that we cannot change, and the justice system is one amongst many. It became apparent that departments are working in isolation and this lack of inter-departmental co-operation and commitment hinders service rendering. As long as the status quo remains, complaints of this nature will never come to an end.

This calls for the recognition that no single department of local or central government, and no single profession has the key either to promoting children's all-round development or to providing solutions for disadvantage and deprivation. The key will only be found through inter-departmental, interdisciplinary cooperation. The pooling of knowledge, of skills and of resources is an essential prerequisite.

This also suggests that all adults involved in the child placement field must collaborate to provide conditions that will allow the child to experience and express his underlying feelings. These feelings are likely to be accessible if the child's fear is manageable, if the child can trust the person with him and if the child can feel that he has some power in the situation, i.e. that his feelings are valid and that expressing them may have some impact on others.

It was also highlighted that there are circumstances where the three tendencies mentioned above are not clearly discernable, and the social worker will have to assess what a certain pattern in the relationship between parent and child means in each individual case. Examples of such patterns are listed and discussed below.

- The situation of children with behaviour problems which result from the lack of supervision caused by a parent's absence, due to a work situation. This situation can be rectified more easily than when a child's problem is the result of a conflict between parent and child. Earlier on some children requested social workers to find adequate employment for their parents, claiming that if their parents can be employed they do not see anything blocking the restoration of their relationship with their parents.

- Some parents with socially approved reasons for their inability to care for their children continue to visit their children, even if there are no or little chances of resuming their care. Visiting in these cases does not, therefore, indicate the likelihood that the parents will resume the care of the child.
- Parents whose children have been returned to their care after a foster placement, or where placement may again be necessary for a further period, have been found to be less resistant to placement if the parents and children have benefited from the previous placement and can be convinced that they can be re-united again as a family when circumstances permit.

Factors relating to the parent-child relationship have been found to have three factors i.e. positive factors; negative factors and more complex factors that affect family re-unification. The latter calls for social workers to deal with these cases on an individual basis and use their own discretion and sensitivity.

The third area mentioned was the quality and quantity of service rendered to the parents before and after the placement of children. Earlier on reasons which frustrate social workers and which contribute to the long stay of children in foster care were mentioned. Shortages of staff, heavy caseloads and no time to render re-unification services all have a significant relevance to the quality and quantity of service delivery. One worker said in support of the above argument, whether parents will be able to resume the care of their children or not, is in many cases not only determined by their own parenting capacity and the kind of relationship established with the child concerned, but also by the kind of service rendered to them before and after placement of children.

The above raises questions in the mind of the researcher:

- Is the service programme structured in such a way as to enable the social worker to give the required quality and quantity of attention to the natural parent?
- Does the department have enough auxiliary services available, that can supplement the counselling services provided by social workers and thus enable marginally functioning parents to carry out the parental role more effectively?

- Is the diagnostic ability of the social worker sufficiently developed to assess the parenting capacity correctly, and is the professional ability of the social workers adequately developed to mobilise the remaining or latent strength in the personality of the parent or in his environment to effect positive changes in him or her?
- Does the social worker have the necessary personal qualities such as commitment, flexibility, warmth, good judgement and a belief in people, to promote change in clients?

5.1.5 THE SOCIAL WORKER'S EXPECTATIONS REGARDING THE ROLES OF ALL PARTIES INVOLVED IN CHILD PLACEMENT:

When parents fail to exercise their parental responsibilities adequately, government as agent of society must intervene to ensure that the well being of children is safeguarded.

1. AGENCY'S ROLE:

Agencies need to be **realistic** about what workers are able to do with the resources at hand, especially with the high HIV and AIDS prevalence, high caseloads, limited places of safety, (especially for infants) time constraints, etc. One worker who supported the above statement said, "We are human, there is only so much that we can do".

Agencies need to **recognise, acknowledge and appreciate** the efforts made by workers who work under difficult and dangerous conditions. He continued "We work in communities where robbery, murder, shootings and hijackings are the order of the day. Despite these conditions we don't despair".

"People at grass-root level are left aside when policies are formulated, beautiful plans for communities are developed at head-office level leaving behind people for whom these plans are developed. At the end of the day those plans are not implemented, as they do not meet the real needs that they were intended for". Agencies are expected to have a **consultative system** in their approach and also a **feedback** system that provides for feedback on a regular basis. This feedback should be an important source for the head office in their development of strategies.

In support of the above one worker said, "The community must not be excluded from decision making because the department alone cannot reduce or eradicate the problem of child placement". Another worker said, "Most of the time we

forget the communities, we work with these people in isolation and most of them don't know what is going on around them".

2. SOCIAL WORKERS:

The worker is responsible for managing parent-child separation in a manner that is sensitive to the child's psychological readiness and that builds in as much environmental support as possible. In view of the crisis-oriented nature of child protection work workers are unable to do as they would like to. "It is not realistic for us to do all these things", one worker commented.

"If we had smaller caseloads, effective therapeutic work with children; their natural parents and foster parents could be possible."

"One thing we need is a definition of neglect, abuse etc. The community defines it one-way, the law another, the child himself still another". The following were the direct words of one participant, a worker from Child Welfare Society: "The society took the matter seriously and worked years and years on what abuse really is; and to differentiate it from material abuse and neglect," but came to no final conclusion. A further question is: How do you differentiate the above two from immediate deprivation? A departmental checklist does exist and this should be utilised to ensure that the right approach is followed.

In so doing one would be able to prepare the child, natural parent and foster parent for separation and placement, and be able to jointly draw up a visiting programme to facilitate family restoration.

3. FOSTER PARENTS:

Expectations placed on foster parents by social workers and the agencies are very high: to treat foster children as their own and yet to let them go.

This uncertainty about a child's future creates difficulties for foster parents. It is difficult to predict how long a child will need care, as this will depend on the family's motivation and capacity. This uncertainty is likely to undermine the commitment of foster parents: they can neither look forward to being relieved of a difficult child after a definite number of months nor can they risk making a strong commitment to a child who may be moved at any time. Under these circumstances, they (the foster parents) are unlikely to give priority to the needs of a child whose behaviour disrupts their family life.

Most workers felt that it is not always realistic to remove a foster child because of the attachment that has developed between the child and the foster family. The bond between them will cause it to be too painful to separate them. A counter-argument to this is that social workers need to inform both the child and the foster parent of the nature of their relationship from the very onset to avoid grief at a later stage.

The above argument suggests that most social workers are not reinforcing the legal aspect of foster care placement in their work with the foster parents and children. When the time comes for the child to go back to her parents, it is expected of the social worker to get into a termination process with both the child and the foster parent so as to avoid negative feelings.

4. NATURAL PARENTS:

The philosophy of permanency planning requires that parental contact be encouraged, as the family is viewed as the best resource for providing permanency to children.

One worker said that if the parents want their children back, it shouldn't only be the responsibility of the social workers to arrange access. It is, thus, expected of natural parents to show initiative in maintenance of contact with their children.

This suggests that parent's co-operation in maintaining contact with their children is used as a test of their interest. The value of ongoing family contact for children in care has been demonstrated in terms of better adjustment in care, earlier reunion, and successful discharge.

5.2 COMMISSIONER OF CHILD WELFARE:

INTRODUCTION:

When it is claimed that a child may be in need of care, the children's court is empowered to inquire into the matter, rule thereon and issue orders effectively removing the child from the parental (or other) custody and placing her in alternative custody as an interim measure, thereby suspending, but not permanently removing, the residential custody right enjoyed by a parent. The procedure employed by the children's court has a threefold legal objective, namely, to

- **Review** the initiative of removal and detention of the child by the social worker.

- Inquire into and make a **finding** on whether the child is in need of care, and then
- Make an **order** concerning the future custody of the child.

This constitutes the primary role of the commissioner presiding over a children's court inquiry. The relevant role players and departments will be empowered by this order to apply their strategies in the interest of the child.

Commissioners act as counsellors to parents, children and others concerned with children, and they also act in an advisory capacity towards welfare organisations. Views of the commissioners of child welfare were thus explored since they play a vital role in the alternative placement of children found to be in need of care.

5.2.1 PERCEPTIONS OF COMMISSIONERS:

1. FEELINGS OF COMMISSIONERS ABOUT THE REMOVAL:

The feelings of commissioners were not that different from those of social workers. The Wynberg commissioner said she always felt saddened when the biological family's circumstances were such that a child could not be maintained within the family. She further stated that when children were placed with unrelated caregivers, she enquired about the availability of family members and postponed the inquiry for an investigation (usually no more than one week).

What the commissioner said suggests that she considers a placement with relatives to be a better option than a placement with strangers. Though the former placement has its complications and disadvantages it is preferred by some commissioners, as it allows children to be in the care of familiar people. Different commissioners have different views on the issue of placement with relatives. There are those who are in favour of such placements and those who oppose it and support placements with unrelated foster parents. What influence do these differences of opinion have on the social workers?

The information Guide for Social Workers on the practical application of the Child Care Act concurs with the above and says, "Each children's court in the various magisterial districts operates independently of each other, as is the case with the criminal and civil matters in the district courts. Some differences will become evident from district to district". This makes the task of social workers, who

relate to more than one district, difficult and confusing. This further suggests that social workers must know and understand the different working styles of commissioners in the districts in which they operate or with which they have dealings.

Also the policy of the department is not in favour of the placements with relatives on financial grounds, unless the child's life is at stake. According to commissioner Dirk van Greuning of Roodepoort, poverty on its own should never constitute a ground for removal. However, if poverty is accompanied by severe neglect, malnourishment, abuse, alcoholism, delayed milestones for the child, poor parental functioning or if the child's life is in danger, then there will be good reasons to remove the child. Commissioner D.S. Rothman of Durban disagrees with the above argument. An agreement between the Western Cape Provincial Department of Social Services and the Child and Family Welfare Sector says, "Article 14(5) of the Child Care Act which refers to 'without visible means of support' is not a sufficient reason and should never be the sole criterion for finding a child in need of care".

2. STATISTICAL INFORMATION ON CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE:

It was difficult to obtain this information as the Wynberg court could only make statistics available for 1999. Before that period Guguletu was under the magisterial district of Mitchell's Plain. The Department of Social Services could only provide statistics for two months i.e. December 1999 and May 2001. This information could also not be obtained from those social workers who are directly involved with supervision and family re-unification services. The available statistics are as follows:

Wynberg Court: 1999 = for whole year 398

Department : for the month of December 1999 = 423

The above statistics suggests a discrepancy between the court and the Department concerning the number of children placed in foster care during the year 1999. This indicates that the court is not registering all of its cases. This may be due to personnel matters; as they have only one clerk of the children's court. According to the department, in one month there were 423 children who were placed in foster care. This indicates that the number of requests for foster care placement is increasing. Indications might also be that this trend will continue because of the phasing out of the State Maintenance Grant, and the concomitant introduction of the less substantial Child Support Grant, which is given only for children up to 7 years.

The difficulty experienced in obtaining statistics over a period of five years suggests that this kind of information is not adequately recorded and the department stated the non-existence of statistics per pay-point. It further suggests that social workers in the districts do not keep monthly statistics. There is a shortage of staff and high caseloads carried by social workers, but a motivation for additional staff cannot be done while there are no statistics to prove this shortage.

3. NUMBER OF CHILDREN RETURNED TO THEIR PARENT:

Courts do not have this information. Their response to this question is "unknown".

This suggests that, in child placement, the commissioner's task starts at the opening of Children's Court Inquiry and ends at the holding of the Inquiry. After that they lose touch with what happens. They hear about that case again if there are problems in the placement and then they have to intervene in terms of section 36(1) of the Child Care Act. It also suggests that there is no feedback system to the court about what happens to the children after placement.

4. FACTORS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO THE RETURN OF CHILDREN TO THEIR PARENTS:

The Wynberg Court commissioner's response was based on general knowledge and on what she thought was true, because of the non-existence of a feedback system to courts in this regard. The commissioner said that she believed that the successful return of a child to her parents depended on a number of factors:

- Co-operation by parents with the reconstruction social worker.
- The parent's motivation and determination, and their ability to improve their personal circumstances.
- Attitude of the child towards restoration to parent's custody (i.e. child-parent relationship).
- Co-operation by foster parents in respect of restoration to parents' custody.
- Commitment of reconstruction social worker.

It is evident from the above that, to her mind, the success of family re-unification rests heavily upon all those involved in child placement.

Parents must pull their weight and apply more of their energy to the resolving of problems that prevent them from functioning as well-adjusted adults and as parents to their children. They must, therefore, give full co-operation, be motivated and determined.

Foster parents must welcome, approve of, and accept natural parents. They must fully understand children in their care and encourage contact with their parents.

Without the commitment of the **family re-unification social worker** none of the above would be sufficient. It was emphasized that that the quality of **service delivery** is of vital importance. That quality will be evident in the rebuilding of the parent-child relationship, which was highlighted as an important factor in determining the success of family restoration.

Eloff supports the above and says, "Factors associated with the return of the child to the care of the parents centre around three areas: general personality and parenting capacity of the parent; the relationship between the parent and the child; and the contribution made by the welfare organisation to assist parents during pre-and-post placement periods" (1987:46).

4. THE STARTING POINT IN REBUILDING THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP:

The commissioner at the Wynberg court interpreted the starting point in rebuilding the parent-child relationship as, "addressing and resolving the reason or reasons why the child has been removed from parental care in the first place". She further stated that an effort to address these issues should be implemented at the stage of finalisation of the Children's Court Inquiry and the court proceedings should be stopped for few a weeks in order to receive feedback.

As stated above, the parent-child relationship is seen as the determining factor in the successful return of children to their parents. The commissioner further suggested and promoted divulgence of information about the past. It is thus evident that children's awareness of their family's background and why they are in care are seen as important aspects of self knowledge, and the latter has been identified as contributing to better understanding and acceptance; forgiveness and re-union. Children themselves confirmed this finding during group discussions.

This process of divulgence should be started during the finalisation of the Children's Court Inquiry and ideally

the court proceedings should adjourn for a couple of weeks to enable the court to receive feedback. This implies giving the investigating social worker enough time to work on this matter. The question arises how feasible this would be, (as much as it would be ideal in practise) given the high caseloads mentioned earlier on, the shortage of staff and the unavailability or non co-operation of parents.

5. FACTORS THAT DELAY FAMILY RE-UNIFICATION IN THE EYES OF THE COMMISSIONER:

After two years of placement the law requires report on why the child is not returned to his/her home, unless there are circumstances in the home of his biological parents that can hinder the child's upbringing and future; under such circumstances the child can stay longer. This must be proved in the social worker's report, which is compiled bi-yearly in terms of section 16 (2) of the Child Care Act. If a stay is prolonged it must be approved by the Minister in whose powers are vested the ability to extend the court order.

Despite such legislation children stay in foster care for many years. Others even get lost in the system. The commissioner's view on what could be the causal factor for such delays in restoration to the parents were explored during an interview held by the researcher with the commissioner. Her response was as follows: "The children's court does not itself deal with the re-integration process". Her response was based on complaints she received from members of the public and concerned parents, which were as follows:

- "There is a lack of adequate reconstruction services rendered to parents.
- There is a lack of co-operation by foster parents and natural parents.
- After the court date families hardly ever see or hear from social workers again, especially social workers of the PAWC (Provincial Administration-Western Cape)".

The above points cannot be statistically proven, but what the commissioner commented on was based on factual evidence, on first-hand information from members of the public and parents who really felt hard done by.

The first and the third complaint reveal that parents tend to be left out of planning for their children in care. They are thus not included or even kept informed about decisions

regarding their children. In a nutshell, social workers tend to minimise the importance of parents in their general approach to foster care. This exclusive approach indicates why the family re-unification process is often delayed.

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CHAPTER 6

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

This study has analysed the literature on separation and placement research with respect to maintaining family ties for children in foster care. It has added to the knowledge gained in practice by exploring placement practises with all involved in child placement in relation to their reactions to separation. The overall picture is that children in care have strong emotional ties to their parents, but these often go unrecognised, while parents tend to be excluded from their children's lives in care. The study's findings are supported by the literature. The conclusions and recommendations are presented according to their implications for children, parents, foster parents, social workers, commissioners of child welfare and agencies.

6.1 CHILDREN:

The children's feelings were often reflected in withdrawn or aggressive behaviour, which was likely to affect the success of placements. Thus, social workers are encouraged to intervene to assist children with the separation experience and its lasting effects, and to encourage contact of these children with their families.

The most helpful form of intervention with children seems to be support from their families. If parents or family members **can accompany children** to an unfamiliar home, their anxiety, sadness, feeling of powerlessness, self-blame and anger can be expressed directly, rather than through aggressiveness and withdrawal. This, in turn, gives the children's families and social workers a chance to respond to their pain; children, on their part can show an increased readiness to accept placement. Parental accompaniment to a new home can remove the frightening aspect of unknown people. A child can thrive better in a foster home when:

- he goes there with his parents' consent and encouragement.
- when he knows that the worker continues to help his parents.
- the social worker talks to him realistically and warmly about his parents; and when, through their frequent visiting, he knows that he has not lost them.

Thus, the worker will serve as an integrating factor between two sets of parents.

Providing information to link the past and present:

Children's awareness of their family backgrounds and of why they were placed in care are important aspects of self-knowledge. The importance of giving background information to foster children was reinforced by this study's findings that children in long-term care did not ask questions until they reached adolescence at which time they seemed to be afraid to ask questions about their parents. Their questions seemed to be:

- Why did my parents abandon me?
- What have I done to them to deserve desertion?
- What do they feel about me now?

If workers can help these children to fill these gaps in their knowledge, beneficial results can be achieved.

The findings support the contention in the literature that many children lack the information they need to develop a realistic account of the past and a sense of identity. Agencies should standardise the communication of family information to children with the use of aids such as cameras, in order to provide family photographs, and short, written family histories. Family information should be routinely obtained at placements so that this can be made meaningful to children. Children should be made aware, at an early age, that they have a right to information about their families. It is thus important for workers to be proactive and support children in accessing information that will help them to integrate their past and present lives.

Workers gave little evidence of having prepared children for moves or having encouraged parents to prepare them. Suggestions in this respect have been identified as:

- involving a familiar person in a move;
- preparing children for pre-placement visits,
- and minimising foster home changes.

Separation theory highlights the importance of accompaniment of children by familiar persons, preferably parents, when move to or enter a new home. Though this

approach is seen as ideal, it seems to be non-existent in reality. Workers cited the lack of time and high caseloads as reasons for moving children without a pre-placement visit, yet research proves that the shock of sudden placement is severely damaging to a child's psychological well-being.

6.1.2 NATURAL PARENTS:

When preventative efforts are insufficient, and children must enter care, the literature and this study have revealed a high risk of parents or families withdrawing from contact with their children. Social workers have the task of assisting families to remain involved in their children's lives. Agencies can create a climate that encourages families to stay involved with their children by adopting **inclusive practises**: involving parents/ families in a move from the beginning, conveying positive attitudes regarding parents to foster parents, and facilitating regular contact.

1. INCLUDING PARENTS IN PLACEMENT FROM THE BEGINNING:

Most children were removed without parental accompaniment. Besides depriving children of support, this communicates to parents that they are not viewed as important to their children. The department should institutionalise an inclusive orientation to care by including it in their initial orientation of foster parents. They should introduce children's parent to their foster parents as early as possible in the placement process, ideally at a pre placement visit. A personal meeting allows people to experience each other as human beings. If foster parents only hear about the parents in terms of their failure to care for their children, and biological parents view the foster parents primarily as competitors for their children's allegiance, they will find it difficult to accept each other. Empirical evidence links positive attitudes on the part of the foster parents with frequent parental visiting: the association is especially strong with visiting by mothers, but does not rule out fathers' visits. It may be expected that parents and foster parents will be likely to work together on behalf of children if the social worker facilitates a relationship between them at the beginning of the placement. Parents should be told on an on-going basis that they are important to their children

2. ELICITING POSITIVE ATTITUDES FROM FOSTER PARENTS:

Some foster parents showed an exclusive attitude towards children's parents. Only occasionally did social workers try to change these attitudes; some workers may have contributed to foster parents' negativity by apparently condoning it. It is important for the department to focus on parent's strengths, in the interest of protecting children's self-esteem: children draw heavily on their families in forming their own self-concepts. This is especially important for children who have no family contact. If their only information comes through foster parents and social workers, who appear to be discounting their parents or labelling them as bad, the children are unlikely to feel good about themselves.

Discussions about child-parent ties should begin at the time of placement, so that children can feel that it is acceptable to talk about their families.

3. ENCOURAGING REGULAR PARENT-CHILD CONTACT:

Some children in the study had minimal or no contact with their parents. In a few cases agencies seemed to discourage visits. Parents who are not given visiting schedules are unlikely to visit; they may not take the initiative regarding access to their children because they are intimidated by the agency, especially if they have lost custody of their children in an adversarial court hearing. With so many influences preventing or impeding visiting, the department should have definite policies encouraging contact.

Office-supervised visits should only be used in unusual circumstances, e.g. with parents who are potentially dangerous to their children or who continually abuse the arrangement of coming to the foster home. Ideally, parents should be welcomed in the home where their children are living; a friendly atmosphere allows children to relate positively to two sets of parents without feeling disloyal to either.

4. GROUPS FOR PARENTS:

A creative way to support parents' involvement with their children is to encourage them to join forces with others who are sharing similar experiences. Self-help groups should be organised for the parents of children in foster care. These groups give parents a chance to share their experiences; it can be comforting to parents to know they are not alone, and can bolster their self-esteem to see that others have also struggled in their parenting roles.

Group members can support each other in continuing to take responsibility for their children; they are likely to gain strength by hearing from each other that they are important to their children.

It is important for that staffing and funding patterns be flexible enough to offer parents the least intrusive service that will help them through a critical time. For parents whose children are fully separated, there must be encouragement to continue to be involved in their children's lives from the foster parents and social workers.

Eloff supports the above statement and says, "It is the task of the social worker to see to it that meaningful and acceptable contact is established between parents and foster parents. Parents, foster parent and children all need to know the answer to questions regarding visits by other members of the family or extended family, special outings, overnight stays and contact by telephone or letter" (1987:44).

6.1.3 SOCIAL WORKERS:

The study revealed a gap between workers' practice and accepted child welfare principles, such as preserving family ties, responding to children's expressed feelings and meeting their needs for information.

1 PRESERVING FAMILY TIES:

Some workers appeared to give priority to the wishes of foster parents when these competed with family ties. An example concerned foster parents' opposition to family contact: workers appeared to comply with foster parents' wishes, without acknowledging the possible effects on child-parent relationships. Social workers made no reference to children's need for family contact and did not report that they encouraged contact or consulted parents or children about their wishes.

2. RESPONDING TO CHILDREN'S FEELINGS:

Social workers did very little to assist children with their feelings. Uncertainty about dealing with this issue was reported and confirmed by their supervisors who in turn often failed to respond to workers' uncertainty about handling aspects of separation. These lapses have several possible explanations: workers and supervisors may not have time, they may lack knowledge, skill, and ease with separation; or the department may not expect them to deal with children's feelings about separation.

In terms of time, the department should ensure that staff members have reasonable caseloads, so that they can routinely focus on children's emotional needs. If workers lack knowledge, skill, and ease with separation issues, they need improved educational preparation. Academic institutions should include in the degree programmes important subjects such as interviewing children and separation theory.

3. PROVIDING INFORMATION:

Workers displayed ambivalence about revealing agency information to children who asked about their own past. This is a typical bureaucratic response-

Employees who have access to information about their clients are often reluctant to allow them access to it. Social workers may be protecting children from knowledge they believe would upset them. This motive is client-centred, yet theory and research suggest that children will be more upset if their questions are not answered. Those who do not know their past will tend to imagine the worst, including blaming themselves for the separation.

The department should provide training in separation issues to all their workers as part of their work orientation. This would help workers to refrain from following placement practices at their agencies that ignores recognised theory and principles.

Criticisms which can be levelled at social workers are that they tended to try to function as good bureaucrats, that they supported the interests of the foster parents who are a valuable resource for the department, to the detriment of the parents and children and were cautious about giving information to their clients, in a misguided attempt to respond sensitively to the needs of these children who were being separated from their parents. Training in separation would be helpful especially if given early in social workers' career.

4. REASONS WHY SOCIAL WORKERS ARE WORKING IN A CRISIS MODE

When workers were pressed by parents, hospitals, and ministerial enquiries to place children, they tended to acquiesce (accept or agree). Not only did they place the children, but they also tended to treat the placement as an emergency, with no pre-placement visits and no parental accompaniment. The question arises why workers react so quickly to parental and other referring agencies' demands?

They may be overwhelmed by too much work; most social workers that are involved in child protection seemed to be overburdened and overworked. Sometimes there are threats that the situation will be published, thereby putting the department in a bad light. The worker therefore gets pressure from the powers that be, which places an unfair burden on the worker and the child. Another reason for such a response might be the workers' instinct to protect children whom they view as being rejected by their parents or families.

5. RESPONDING EFFECTIVELY TO PARENTS' REQUEST FOR HELP

The departmental hierarchy can be used to help workers respond effectively to parent's demands for placement: to make a good decision, to contract with the parents for ongoing work, and to involve parents in the placement. It is important for workers to challenge parental assumptions that all their problems will be solved by placement. Workers should engage the parent in examining how the whole family contributed to the crisis and how they may work during placement towards future integration. (Encouraging contact, various kinds of contact can be used i.e. telephone, letter, visits).

A condition for granting parents' request that their child should be placed in foster care should be their agreement to participate in the placement process. This includes explaining placement as positively as possible to their children, supporting and accompanying them through admission to care, and maintaining regular contact. In all these ways the department can provide leadership to workers as they guide parents or families through decision-making, family counselling, and eventual reunion.

4. THE DEPARTMENT OR AGENCIES:

Supporting Inclusion of Parents: Agencies seem to adopt an all-or-nothing view of parental involvement with children: if parents cannot care for their children at home, the department takes over and excludes them. This seems to be a punitive approach - families who cannot do the whole job have most of their parental rights removed. Foster care should be viewed as an integral part of the continuum of support offered to families rather than a substitute for parents who have failed. On the other hand parents must be encouraged to show initiative and interest in wanting to take charge of their children's lives.

To counteract the organisational tendency to exclude parents, the department must develop inclusive policies and procedures and make them explicit to workers and clients.

Parents should be encouraged to take as much responsibility as they are willing and able to assume.

There may be parents who are not willing to be involved with their children; they will agree to plans but not carry them out. Workers tend to give up on such parents, without really trying to individualise their expectations. The flexible approach requires patience and the department should support workers in accepting parents' limitations and reinforcing small gains.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. THE FOSTER PARENTS:

There should be a training programme for foster parents that should be provided on an ongoing basis. Foster parents should, therefore, be required to attend workshops offered on the various difficulties associated with foster care. This training programme should include information and discussions on:

- Maintenance of parental contact;
- How to deal with challenging children;
- Importance of family ties;
- Foster parent-worker relationship;
- The value of parents to their children;

This training programme would equip foster parents with knowledge and skills in dealing with and understanding foster children and their parents.

2. THE FOSTER CHILD:

Foster children should be involved in the decision-making process that affects their lives, and this involvement should increase as they grow older.

Group work should be considered as a method of meeting the foster child's emotional needs. Support groups for foster children should be considered so that they can be given the opportunity to share their experiences.

These children have a right to know their background; it is, therefore, essential for social workers to inform children of their background history. By so doing they will be helping children to have self-knowledge, and have understanding of why they are in placement. This

information serves as a powerful tool that increases their self-esteem as it gives them a sense of control over their own lives.

3. BIOLOGICAL PARENTS:

Parents should be included or involved in the placement process of their children. They should accompany their children to the new home. They should provide their children with background information so that they can develop self-awareness. (The inclusive approach has a major advantage of encouraging teamwork between foster parents and parents, increasing the chances of reunion).

4. THE SOCIAL WORKERS:

The department must find creative ways of reducing social workers' high caseloads. The social workers need to be supported and guided to make decisions that are in the best interest of the foster child. The department should recognise the efforts made by social workers, considering the unsatisfactory conditions under which they are working.

5. THE POSITION REGARDING ACCESS:

Details surrounding access should preferably be specified at the time of the inquiry and in writing to prevent serious disagreements about this issue at a later stage.

The ideal is that there should be an introduction between child, foster family and biological parents in advance of the actual placement. The opportunity to know more about the foster family through meeting them beforehand is also a suitable way of easing stress at the moment of placement itself.

In cases where children have made a successful adjustment in the foster home and, thus, developed mixed feelings about returning to their own parents, the use of holiday visits in terms of Section 35 of the Child Care Act 74 of 1983 is a valuable preparatory experience for both the parent and the child.

Family contact seems to be very important to foster children and NO-ONE must take that away from them.

6. RECOGNISING THE NEEDS OF WORKERS:

Social workers are working under difficult and dangerous conditions. A number of social workers have been killed (shot dead) in line of duty; one was strangled, while

others experienced car hijackings. The department seems to be unconcerned about such issues.

There needs to be structures in place that safeguard the lives of employees and the department should also develop a culture of sensitivity to matters of this nature.

7. AGENCY STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS:

The department should take cognisance of the issues raised in this study so as to recognise the importance of the inclusion of biological parents from the very onset in the placement process of their children (i.e. parental accompaniment to the home, a pre-placement visit of the child and parents to the new people and new environment and the encouragement of contact between the child and his/her parents).

CLOSING STATEMENT:

Most of these children who are placed in foster care had mixed feelings. Though they were angry with their parents, and felt confused and empty, they often felt relieved to be rescued from unbearable events that were totally outside their control. At the same time they expressed a need to be re-united with their parents.

Under normal conditions, separation of a child from a loved parent is a maturing experience. Growing up is a growing away from home and familiar associations. In child placement, however, separation is something quite different. Here it seldom, by itself, means growth for a child, but usually the reverse. So humiliating and frightening is the experience to many children that they revert desperately to behaviour that is no longer appropriate.

Separation is a healthy experience when the child is ready for it. The obstacle in child placement is that he/she is seldom ready. In the normal situation, the child has sufficient emotional security to liberate him/her for new experiences and new people. But the foster child has almost never been accorded security so essential for his/her growth; neither, the love and admiration of a mother and father happily married nor the assurance of their continuous presence and reliability.

Poverty also contributes to the separation of children from their parents. It is believed that poverty is a silent killer and it has emotionally ruined the lives of many families. In a poverty hearing that was held in Kwazulu Natal on 11 May 1998, a farm worker said " We keep reading

and hearing reports of individuals who require operations or treatments that cost thousands of rands, and we hear little or nothing about thousands of people whose lives depend on interventions that would cost a few rands." He added, " I don't need help from any one, all we need are opportunities."

All those involved with child placement, including those in powers, have a vital role to play in service provision, policy making, support and information dissemination.

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ANNEXURE 1

INTERVIEWING SCHEDULE

(FOSTER CHILDREN)

1. How did you feel when you were removed from your biological parents?
2. Were you informed about your removal? If yes, how? If not, how did you feel about not being informed?
3. Were you given a chance to ventilate your feelings?
4. How do you feel now?
5. How do you feel about visitation during this period?
6. Whom do you prefer for a visit whilst you are in foster care placement and why do you prefer that person?
7. What kind of contacts would you prefer to take place between you and your biological parents?
8. How often do you think these contacts must take place? Motivate.
9. In your own understanding what is the main purpose of these visitations?
10. What are your expectations from the following people
 - Biological parents
 - Foster parents
 - Social workers
11. How do you feel about being re-united with your family? Motivate.
12. Which role can you play towards effective family re-unification?

ANNEXURE 2

INTERVIEWING SCHEDULE

(FOSTER & BIOLOGICAL PARENTS)

1. Do you consider it important for foster parents to be screened? If yes, motivate and state which procedure to follow.
2. What is the average length of time taken to remove a child from a biological parent/family to foster parents/family?
3. Once foster placement is in effect recommend the appropriate period that it should last and motivate your answer.
4. Do you consider parental visitation during the recommended period to be necessary? Motivate.
5. According to your understanding, what are the pros and cons of parental visitation during this period?
6. Recommend the waiting period before biological parents or children can visit one another and motivate your recommendation.
7. How often should these visits take place? Support your response.
8. How do you feel about the presence of the following people during these visits.
 - (a) Social worker
 - (b) Foster parent

Explain why you feel the way you do.

9. How good or bad is the present relationship between the foster parents and the biological parents? If not satisfactory what can be done to improve it?
10. What effects do these meetings /visits by parents have on the child?
11. What impact does the visits have on the foster parents and the biological parents.
12. Recommend appropriate and realistic procedures to be followed to encourage and improve parental visitation towards the family reunification process.

ANNEXURE 3

INTERVIEWING SCHEDULE

(SOCIAL WORKERS)

1. How do you feel about removing a child from his/her biological parents? Why
2. How do you reach the decision to remove a child from his/her parents/family?
3. Do you enter into proper consultations with the biological parents and children prior to the removal? If yes, how; if not, why?
4. Would you regard building a relationship between parents and biological parents as essential before the removal and placement of the child? Elaborate.
5. What is your follow-up procedures whilst a child is in foster care?
6. According to your understanding, what delays the contact between the parents and their children?
7. Does the reason for removal have an effect /influence on visitation? Why and how?
8. What are your expectations regarding the role of the following people in respect of visitation during the placement period?
 - (a) Your agency.
 - (b) Social workers.
 - (c) Foster parents.
 - (d) Biological parents
9. What are the most common problems you encounter with visitation?
10. What procedure do you follow regarding the re-unification of foster children with their biological parents/family?
11. Are the foster parents and children counselled before hand as to how to deal with this when, it happens? At which stage should this happen?
12. How would you like to see the visitation process improved?

QUESTIONNAIRE:

COMMISSIONER OF CHILD WELFARE

1. How do you feel about the removal of a child from his/her biological family to foster family?

2. Are you always in favour of the social worker's recommendations to remove the child from his/her biological family to foster family?

3. Do social workers' reports reflect adequate preparatory work done prior to the removal of the child? Elaborate.

4. Considering statistical records, how many children have been placed in foster care by your court from February 1999 to February 2000?

5. Given the above statistics, how many children have been successfully returned to their biological parents?

6. In your opinion what were the contributory factors to the successful restoration of children to their parents?

7. According to your understanding what delays the family reunification process between parents and children?

8. Does the reason for removal have any bearing /influence on family reunification? Why and how?

9. What are your expectations regarding the role of the following role players in the visitation process:

(a) The Children's Court

(b) Social workers

(c) Foster parents

(d) Biological parents

(e) Foster children

10. According to your understanding, what should be the starting point in rebuilding relationship between the child and his/her biological parents?

11. Why do you think the factor mentioned above should be a starting point?

12. Recommend an adequate strategy to be utilised towards the improvement of the visitation process and indicate how this should be implemented?

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