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The Fostering Healthy Parents Program: A Specialized Program Developed for the Foster Care Community

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Introduction

A disconnect exists between the availability of resources for foster families and the foster families' knowledge of the availability of those resources (Miller, Randle, & Dolnicar, 2019). A lowered retention rate amongst foster families can be observed, possibly due to the perceived lack of support, resources or educational opportunities within the foster community. More than half of all foster parents quit within their first year of participating in the system (National Council for Adoption, 2018). A gap in programming for foster parent education and support was identified. More educational courses that focus on the needs of foster families ought to be created and implemented for the betterment of the foster care community.

Program Development and Design

The state of Arizona requires that all foster parents have 12 hours of continuing educational courses/training every 2 years (Arizona Department of Child Safety, 2020). The foster parents need continuing educational courses that are relevant to their needs and interests. After discussion with the founder of Jose's Closet, a nonprofit organization with goals to assist in providing resources for foster families, a program was developed. A presurvey was distributed; classes were created based on survey; a certification was made for participants who attended; marketing was created and distributed; registration form was sent to those interested; classes were presented; resources were distributed.

Program Objectives

Foster families enrolled in the Fostering Healthy Parents program will be able to:

1. Enable foster families enrolled in the program to identify local resources available in the community which they can utilize to better their family dynamics.
2. Impress upon foster families enrolled in the program to able to understand the impact that abuse and neglect can have on their foster child's development.
3. Educate foster families and increase their understanding of common developmental issues seen in foster children, such as disorganized attachment styles, decreased coping skills, decreased performance in activities of daily living, maladaptive behaviors, and sensory processing issues.

Program Timeline

- 14 weeks long
- Weeks 1 and 2: Collected resources for the families for each class, created the local resource handout and prepared the classes.
- Weeks 3, 6, and 9: Child Abuse/Neglect and Attachment class
- Weeks 4, 7, and 10: Coping Skills and Activities of Daily Living class
- Weeks 5, 8, and 11: Challenging Behaviors class
- Week 12: Question-and-Answer class
- Weeks 13 and 14: Program evaluation, data analysis

Program Outcomes

Pre-Survey (N=17) outcomes: Identified topics of interest for classes

- Attachment, Abuse/Neglect, Coping Skills, Challenging Behaviors, and Activities of Daily Living

Registration Form (N=25) outcomes: Identify the demographics of the families; develop a better understanding of the needed resources and support needed; developed insights regarding the concerns of this demographic group

Question	Top 2 Responses
What resources and/or services do you feel are needed for foster families, parents, and children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training Opportunities (Trauma, Challenging Behaviors, etc.) • Emotional/Social Support
Where/how do you need more support in order to be the best parent for your children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education/Trainings • Support Groups
What are two things you wish you would have known before you became a foster parent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court/Case Worker Process • Bio Parents and Education/Training on Kids
What are three great things about being a foster parent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping the Child/Making a Difference • Learning New Skills/Growing
What are three challenging things about being a foster parent?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging Behaviors/Attachment • Difficulty with System

Post Class Survey (N=13) outcomes: Developed insights regarding successful education opportunities, changes needed, and whether additional information/resources were needed.

- All participants were satisfied or very satisfied with the content and resources that were provided
- 12 out of 13 participants reported learned something new
- All stated that they would recommend the course to a fellow foster parent, that the class was relevant to their current situation, and that they would take another class with the instructor

Class Discussion (N=93) outcomes: Furthered insights of the foster care community

Question	Responses
What was their favorite local resource?	Local foster parent groups on Facebook, Jose's Closet, ASA Now, and Arizona Helping Hands
What do you like to do with the foster child/children the first night/week of the placement	Going out to the child's favorite restaurant, Playing a game as this was a good way to better understand the child's personality/temperament/social skills/etc.
If your friend was thinking about becoming a foster parent, what advice would you give the friend?	It is really hard; Very emotional; It takes a village; The best thing you will ever do.

Program Demographics

- 46 Individuals participated in at least 1 class (30 days-14.5 years as a foster parent)
- 59 Biological children (Mode age: 21+ years)
- 33 Foster children (Mode age: 1-4.11 years)
- 18 Adopted children (Mode age: 5-10.11 years)

Discussion

While parents enjoyed and found the educational content and resources from the class to be useful and effective, *support from other foster parents was the key factor needed*

Implications for Occupational Therapy Practice:

- Deliver content that is valued/needed by the foster parents to provide a base of conversation and provide enough time for discussion or an extra class/support group
- Foster care population is unique. Special considerations are needed:
 - Busy and demanding schedules (Court and case manager appointments, biological parent meetings, other doctors/therapy appointments, etc.)
 - Uncertainty of how long the child will be with the family which can impact scheduling therapy appointments
 - Support the needs of the whole family not just the needs of the foster child
 - Develop activities that support attachment, manage challenging behaviors

Implications for Future Studies:

- Longitudinal study to identify if parents who attended a program with desired educational courses and support groups would have a higher retention rate in the foster care system than those who did not attend.

Conclusions

Occupational therapists can improve their effectiveness within this community in the following ways:

- Provide educational courses and information regarding services or support groups is equally important as servicing the developmental needs of the children involved.
- Help parents/guardians to develop confidence through a support system and access to the proper resources.
- Support development of a healthier relationship and environment for children and their foster parents in order to improve mental health, attachment styles and future potential for success.

Acknowledgments

Faculty Advisor: Rachel Diamant, PhD, OTR/L, BCP
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 Community Mentor: Tonya Doty, MSOT, OTR/L
 Foster parents for attending and participating in classes

References

See provided references