

Research Report in Brief

Moving in Foster Care: The Perspective of Foster Care Alumni



March 15, 2007

Why Study Multiple Placement Moves in Foster Care?

Most people agree that multiple foster care placements are not good for children. But, little is known about how move experiences—from one foster home to another, from foster care to birth family home, or moves between family placements and group care facilities—affect foster children or the lasting impressions of multiple moves after children exit the foster care system.

We need to better understand the human experience of placement moves so that professionals and parents can be better equipped to help foster children. There is a lot of research investigating placement moves—also referred to as *placement stability* or *placement breakdown*—but none defines a move from the perspective of individuals directly involved in the

*"Hmmm, how can I tell you...You got to the point where you were afraid to get attached to anyone because you knew it wasn't permanent....You callous yourself, are afraid to get attached, and then when you get to someone nice it takes a while to break down the brick wall.
-60+ year old, Caucasian*

move experience, such as foster children and foster families. Most research on the topic gathers data from case records, which is a very narrow and impersonal point of view. Understanding placement moves from the perspective of people who have lived the experience is a missing ingredient from the research, and is needed to develop better policy and practice response

Study Details

In this report, we describe the responses of 22 foster care alumni, between the ages of 18½ to 65 years old, who were asked questions in four areas: (1) What did they remember about their placement move experiences? (2) What impact did past placement moves have on their lives today? (3) How would they define a placement move? (4) What advice do they have for best handling a placement move? A priority of the study was to hear from foster care alumni in their own words. All participants were asked the same interview questions but participated in three different ways: 3 alumni chose to type their responses on an e-mail survey, 15 agreed to telephone interviews, and 4 elected to be interviewed in person. Trained



The Moving in Foster Care Project was reviewed by WMU's Human Subjects Institution Review Board.

interviewers typed each telephone response as it was given, and then edited transcripts for accuracy after the interview. Face-to-face interviews were audio taped with permission from the participant, and then later transcribed word-for-word. Two primary researchers, who looked for both common and unique themes, systematically analyzed all pages and comments. The final research analysis was then independently reviewed by experts—two foster alumni who have focused their careers in foster care (Dr. John Seita and Ms. Anita Lacy).

Question 1: What Foster Care Alumni Remember about Multiple Moves

The short answer to this study question is that moving was remembered by the majority of participants as a traumatic event associated with detachment, loss and difficult emotions.

- ❖ **Loss.** Every participant referred to some kind of loss associated with moving. Six themes of loss emerged: loss of power over one's personal destiny, loss of friends and connections with school, loss of self-esteem, loss of normalcy, loss of personal belongings, loss of (separation from) siblings.
- ❖ **Detachment.** Most participants recalled moving as a point in time when they "shut down," "withdrew" or "disconnected from others." Shutting down emotionally seemed to be a common "solution" to the problem of managing loss and uncertainty.
- ❖ **Memory of a Caring Adult.** Memories of caring adults (including foster parents and caseworkers) made a positive difference for some in the journey through multiple foster care placements.

"I didn't know what would happen next..I never knew what was going on...didn't know where I was going, if I was staying"
9+ moves, 43-53 year old Caucasian

"...just when I got comfortable I had to move. It was really hard. You don't have a say in it"
8 moves, 18-19 year old Biracial

- ❖ **Guarded Optimism.** Amidst the mostly painful memories of placement moves lingered a cautious sense of hopefulness that things would eventually get better. Also, some mention was made about the "upside of moving" by participants who remembered it as "a chance to get out of a bad situation," a "chance to start over," or receive "additional attention or support", though the move process itself was still difficult.

Question 2: What are the Lasting Impressions of Multiple Placement Moves

Participants were asked whether they currently had any personal habits that they thought were tied to placement moves experienced during childhood. While foster care alumni perceive the problems of placement moves in similar ways, their strategies for coping were unique and individualized.

- ❖ **Habits Taking Away from Quality of Life.** Most participants tied placement moves in the past to having difficulty trusting other people today. A wariness of others seemed to be at the heart of several present-day relationships challenges such as keeping a "safe distance" from others, living a transient/loner lifestyle,

"if you move from place to place.. people become liars...it destroys your trust for a long long time"
13+moves 37-40 year old African-American

and regularly, managing emotions. Also, mental illness (e.g., depression) was tied to past moves for a few participants.

- ❖ **Habits that Add to Quality of Life.** These responses were very unique to individual participants. Examples of distinctive strengths drawn from an otherwise difficult experience include: "Being a better parent," "more assertive," "able to accept difference," and "prepared for what comes."

Question 3: How do Foster Care Alumni *Define* a Placement Move

Physical shifts. Nearly all participants voiced strongly “every move counts.” “It doesn’t matter if it’s a week or a day or an hour...it all counts.” Over and over, we heard that “a move is a move” and every shift in placement has an impact on a child.

Cognitive or Emotional Shifts. The emotional build up associated with placement moves was a strong theme. As one participant stated, “Emotions are still there even in one day.” Many participants mentioned that even short stays get your hopes up.

“Every move is a move. You are trying to adjust right away...the FBI would count it. Once you relocate it is a move — 60+ year old Caucasian

“Every move counts. Your life changes. You walk home from school wondering...is this the day I move again” — 26–31year old Native American

Markers of Move Events. About half of the participants pointed to concrete signs as an indicator of a move event taking place such as: when “you have to pack all your stuff it’s a move” or “when you go to meet the other person that you are going to stay with.”

Return Home as a Move. We asked whether moving back and forth between a foster care placement and a birth family is different than moving back and forth between foster care placements and found two opposing opinions. Many participants said there is no difference citing reasons such as “you are still moving back and forth,” and “everyone is watching you.” Others said that a return home was unlike a move to another foster care placement because it involved different emotions and different expectations.

Question 4: What Advice do Foster Care Alumni Offer to Foster Children, Foster Parents and Caseworkers about How Best to Handle a Placement Move?

This was a difficult question for many participants to answer, and drew many long pauses in the interviews. Many told us that there is no silver bullet, no one best response to when a child moves from one placement to another. Alumni told us that what caseworkers, foster parents and foster children need to do *depends* on the unique circumstances and needs of each child. In general, participants communicated a sense of powerlessness felt by children experiencing placement moves. As one participant said “It’s kinda hard...cause...I’m trying to think of something that would have helped me...I don’t know...sometimes there really isn’t anything you can do.”

The advice that participants offered to foster parents and caseworkers was not new. Ideas for foster parents included: embrace the foster child into your home, have a plan, explain house rules, and connect with the child’s future. Ideas for caseworkers included: be truthful, dependable, caring, supportive, and plan transition activities to lessen the uncertainty of the move. Beyond the tasks associated with placement moves, a more important message was voiced about *how* foster parents and caseworkers might approach foster children when carrying out the tasks. In general, participants called for a compassionate and inclusive response by adults who are involved with children through a placement transition..

Details about Study Participants

The 22 foster care alumni participating in this study were referred by past caseworkers, foster parents, and each other. All had experienced at least two placement moves and were no longer in the care of the foster care system. Fifteen (68%) participants were female and 7 (32%) were male.

When asked to identify their race, thirteen (59%) participants said they were Caucasian or White, 3 African American, 3 Native American, 2 Biracial and 1 Hispanic. They ranged in age from 18.5 to 65 years old. Most (69%) said they first entered care at 9 years or older, and the majority (78%) aged out of care between 16 and 19 years old.

Nineteen (87%) remembered their “shortest” placement as lasting weeks or months. In contrast, the “longest” placement stay remembered was 1 to

4 years for 16 participants (73%). Four (18%) said their longest stay was less than 1 year and one had lived in the same place for 6 years.

Eighteen (82%) participants had graduated high school; five had done so by completing their GEDs. Six participants had earned college degrees. Fifteen (68%) were employed (or in school) full-time, and 18 (82%) said they currently had health care (includes Medicaid).

Seven (32%) participants remembered experiencing 3–5 moves, 7 (32%) recalled 6–9 moves, and 8 (37%) remembered 10 or more moves during their foster care stay. Placement stays included foster homes (unrelated), placements with relatives, return home and group care facilities.

Contact:

Yvonne Unrau, PhD
School of Social Work
Western Michigan University

Phone:

269-387-3185

Fax:

269-387-3183

E-Mail:

Yvonne.Unrau@wmich.edu

Acknowledgements

This research study was conducted by Yvonne Unrau, Associate Professor and two social work students—Kristin Putney (Project Coordinator) and Alexis Ruthenbeck (Research Assistant).

Thanks to the study participants who trusted us enough to share their memories about placement moves so that others could learn from them.

Thanks for funding support to the College of Health and Human Services and the School of Social Work at Western Michigan University for providing graduate assistant funds to support this project.

Thanks to our Expert Informants Dr John Seita, Assistant Professor, Michigan State University; Anita Lacy, Director, Michigan Foster Education Resource Network.

Next Steps. Moving in Foster Care – Part 2: The Perspective of Foster Parents is now underway.

*Look for Future Publications for this Study
on the Web:*

<http://homepages.wmich.edu/~yunrau/>
