

**RESEARCH REPORT**

**MOVING IN FOSTER CARE:  
VOICES OF ADULTS WHO EXPERIENCED  
MULTIPLE FOSTER CARE PLACEMENTS IN CHILDHOOD**



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a qualitative research study that examined the impact of placement moves on adults who had experienced multiple foster care placements during childhood. Other research has referred to people formerly living in foster care as alumni (e.g., Pecora and colleagues, 2003 and 2005). We use the term alumni to communicate to readers that this report fits in the domain of what is commonly referred to as foster care alumni research. However, we are mindful that the term “alumni”—if meant to communicate that our participants all “graduated” from the “institution” of foster care—is not necessarily a perspective or label that participants in our study would choose to identify themselves.

The study was carried out over a three-month period in the spring of 2006. The study would not have been possible without the willingness of participants to open themselves up to our interview questions and to refer other alumni to the project.

The primary purpose of this report is to give voice to the study participants. The interview responses gathered through the research interviews in many ways speak for themselves. To understand how the interview responses were derived, we provide details of study procedures in Appendix A of the report. Our rationale for detailing information about study procedures is so that readers may judge the credibility of the findings, which are comprised of categories and themes that we derived from what participant told us in the interviews.

This report is an initial step in the dissemination efforts for this project. It focuses on what the participants had to say in response to the interview questions and how the researchers, with input from foster alumni experts, organized those responses into meaningful themes. Additionally, this report provides summary comments by the author but leaves out in-depth discussion such as, how the findings relate to other research. As one of our foster care experts noted, “when you listen to these quotes” it is possible to get an understanding of what the alumni experienced. The next steps in dissemination include writing for a public and professional audience, which will require interview responses to be synthesized and summarized into a manageable word count and compressed into brief paragraphs where only a few quotes will be featured. Therefore, this report serves as the comprehensive record of the project findings.

Presented in this report is information to inform and stimulate discussion about the impact of placement moves experienced by children in foster care. In turn, the hope is that such discussion will lead to improving or advancing how professionals and foster parents understand placement moves and how they respond to children during such transitions. The information contained in this report presents the perspective of foster care alumni on the topic of multiple placement moves in care.





## 2. STUDY PARTICIPANTS

The study involved interviews with adults who lived in multiple foster care placement as children. Most alumni participants lived in Michigan but were recruited from as far away as Canada. The primary mode of recruitment for study participation was word-of-mouth. Our efforts at recruitment began by contacting alumni who were personally known to us or publicly identified as former foster children. In addition, referrals were sought from foster care agencies and other foster care researchers, approaching alumni who have publicly identified themselves as such, and seasoned foster parents. Finally, at the end of each interview, study participants were invited to refer others to the project. To be eligible for study participation, alumni had to meet three criteria: (1) minimum of 18 years old, (2) no longer in care and (3) have lived in two or more placements while in care.

Our recruitment efforts yielded 22 participants. Fifteen (68%) were female and 7 (32%) were male. When asked to identify their race, alumni replies were as follows: 13 (59%) “White or Caucasian,” three (14%) “Black or African American,” three (14%) “Native American or Aboriginal,” two (9%) Biracial, and one Hispanic.

On average, alumni entered foster care at age 11 (entry range 0 to 15 years old) and exited at age 18 (exit range was 11 to 19 years old). The average length of stay in foster care was 7 years (length of stay range 2 to 19 years). We did not ask alumni any questions about the reasons why they entered foster care. Table 1 shows the number and type of placement moves remembered by alumni.

Table 1: Number and Type of Placement Moves Remembered

<b>Number of Placements</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Shortest Placement Stay</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
3 to 5	7	32%	Days	1	5%
5 to 9	7	32%	Weeks	7	32%
10 to 19	5	23%	Months	12	55%
20 or more	3	14%	A Year	1	5%
			Missing	1	5%
<b>Type of Placements*</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Longest Placement Stay</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>	<b>%</b>
Home of a Relative	9	41%	Less than 1 year	4	18%
Foster Home (no relation)	22	100%	1 to 2 years	9	41%
Staffed Facility	12	55%	2 to 3 years	4	18%
Birth Parent (Return home)	7	32%	3 to 4 years	3	14%
			5 years or more	1	5%

\* Participants could select more than one choice.



The age range of study participants is a special feature of the study. The youngest participant was 18 and the oldest was 65 years old. On average, alumni had exited from foster care about 18 years (range 6 months to 47 years) prior their interviews. This time span is important because participants were asked to recall events that not only took place a long time ago but were memories of difficult periods in their lives. It is reasonable to assume that life experience accumulated, after exiting foster care, would filter how earlier foster care experiences were remembered. However, age of participants, as it turned out, was not particularly helpful to us in our efforts to make sense of what participants had to say. Gender, race, and number of moves also did not prove as useful concepts for organizing participant responses. Regardless of these characteristics, participants spoke of their placement move experiences as though they had “happened yesterday.” This was true even for alumni who told us that they had not thought about their foster care experience for years before agreeing to participate in the study.

We asked a few questions to measure how alumni were faring in their present day lives. Specifically, we asked about education, employment and health. With respect to education, we know that 18 (82%) participants had completed high school or had earned their GEDs. However, several alumni also told us that their educational achievements had far surpassed high school. Indeed, six alumni told us that they went on to higher education (i.e., 2 doctorate, 1 masters, 1 baccalaureate, and 2 college degrees). A shortcoming of our demographic questions was to limit our question about educational achievement to high school completion. It is possible that our sample is more accomplished than what is typically reported in alumni research.

In terms of employment, only 15 (68%) alumni said they currently had full-time employment or were attending school full-time. This count includes one full-time mother who chose not to work outside the home and one alumnus who retired from full-time employment. Most alumni (82%) reported having health insurance, and this count includes Medicaid. Finally, 16 alumni said they still have contact with at least one adult (e.g., relative, foster parent, staff) who cared for them during their time in foster care. The amount of contact ranged from “once in a long while” to “almost daily.” We have no information about the nature or quality of contact between alumni and former caregivers.

With the possible exception of higher educational achievements, the demographics of participants in this study are comparable to other alumni research. Table 2 shows key demographics of this study (Moving in Foster Care) side by side with demographics of other much larger alumni studies. The purpose of comparing the studies in Table 2 is only to show that the demographic composition of the study sample is in line with what is reported by other studies. Because this study is qualitative, we do not claim that the *N* of 22 participants in this study is representative of any particular population of alumni.



Table 2: Demographic Characteristics Compared to Other Alumni Research Studies

	Moving in Foster Care Study (N=22)	Casey National Alumni Study (N=1609)	Northwest Alumni Study (N=659)	Midwest Evaluation Study (N=321)
% Female	68%	55%	61%	51%
% Caucasian	59%	65%	46%	45%
Current Age (Median, Range)	31 (18-65)	30 (21-51)	24 (20-33)	19
Age in Years at Entry to Care	10	9	11	--
Age at Exit out of Care	18	19	18.5	--
Average Number of Years in Care	7	7.2	6.1	--
% with 'x' Number of Moves				--
3 or less	9%	18%	32%	--
4 to 7	45%	--	35%	--
8 or more	45%	56% <sup>a</sup>	32%	--
% with 20 or more moves	9%	3%	--	--
% High School Graduate (or GED)	82%	88%	84%	64% <sup>b</sup>
% Employed or at School	68%	88%	74%	47%
% without Health Insurance	18%	29%	33%	53%

<sup>a</sup> % is a count of 7 or more moves

<sup>a</sup> an additional 22% of participants were currently enrolled





### 3. STUDY FOCUS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In recent years, many research studies have focused attention on the problem of placement instability, especially for children that experience multiple placement moves during their foster care stay. Missing from the research is the voice of people—child or adult—who have lived through the experience of multiple foster care placements (Unrau, 2007).

The motivation for this study was to better understand the placement move experience from the point of view of individuals who personally experienced multiple placement moves during their foster care stays. In particular, the study addressed four main research questions.

- How do foster care alumni remember the experience of placement moves?
- What lasting impressions or impact did multiple placement moves have on foster care alumni?
- How do foster care alumni define a placement move?
- What advice do foster care alumni have to offer—foster children, foster parents and caseworkers—about how to best handle a placement move?





## **4. ABOUT THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The main research findings of this study are presented in the next four sections (e.g., 5 to 8) of the report—one section of finding for each of the four major research questions addressed in this study. Detail about the research process used to produce the study’s findings is provided in Appendix A of this report, and the research-minded reader may wish to review that section first. Information about the research approach and procedures of the study is necessary for the reader to judge the credibility of the findings presented here.

Before presenting the findings related to each of the four research questions, we first discuss three important themes that emerged from the data but did not neatly fit or “answer” any particular question that we asked of participants. We think of these themes as setting the tone or backdrop to facilitate a deeper understanding of the findings presented in Sections 5 through 9. Secondly, we describe the layout of how the findings are presented in the sections that follow.

### **4.1 TONE OF ALUMNI RESPONSES**

The key messages conveyed by foster care alumni are comprised of two parts: content and tone. Content refers to the tangible words and phrases used by alumni to communicate their direct replies in response to the research questions they were asked. The content of the messages are presented in Sections 5 to 9. In contrast, the tone of the interviews refers more so to the tangible words that pointed to the nature or quality of how interview responses were expressed by alumni. Thus, content refers to “what” was said, tone refers to “how” the “what” was expressed.

One component of tone refers to the quality of alumni’s voices as they spoke in the interviews. For example, a humorous tone versus a hesitant one communicates a different message even when the same words are used. A second aspect of tone is words or phrases that did not necessarily answer a particular question but nevertheless were spread throughout the interviews. It is this second aspect of tone that we describe here.

Three main themes noted in interviews, related to participant tone, include: difficult emotions, guarded optimism, and use of metaphors.

#### **4.1.1 Difficult Emotions**

Fear, abandonment, pain, trauma, anger, and remembrance of not being believed by adults responsible for their care emerged as themes that we labeled as difficult emotions. The transcripts were thick with words to convey these sentiments. For example, feelings of fear were communicated by words such as “scared, afraid and afraid to death,” and were peppered throughout the transcripts as alumni recalled their move experiences.



Difficult emotion was a strong undercurrent that rippled through all of the interviews. The presence of difficult emotions in the text of the interviews largely is a reflection that for most alumni placement moves were remembered as negative experiences. However, difficult emotions were also prevalent for the few alumni that spoke about a particular move or placement as a welcomed event in their lives (e.g., leaving a “bad” placement).

#### **4.1.2 Guarded Optimism**

Amidst the mostly difficult emotions conveyed in the interviews was a sense of guarded optimism, which might best be described as cautious hopefulness that life would eventually get better. Guarded optimism was expressed using humor in the interviews, as well as through statements that conveyed a positive outlook on life. This theme speaks to a quality of resilience that was shared by most of the participants.

#### **4.1.3 Metaphors**

Another striking feature that surfaced in the analysis of text transcripts was the use of metaphors by many participants. Alumni used references such as being a “civilian in a war,” “being a guinea pig,” “having teeth drilled without medication,” “moving to a foreign country,” “changing jobs,” “throwing a dog into the street,” “Norman Rockwell paintings” and “getting out of prison” in reply to many interview questions. We did not become aware of the use of metaphors until later in the analysis after the interviews had ended. Therefore, we did not probe more deeply as to their meaning. Moreover, the significance of the use of metaphors by the participants was pointed out to us by both of our foster alumni experts.

It is certainly the case that placement moves are complex. But more than that, our foster alumni experts told us that the placement move experience is difficult to describe in a way that a person who has not experienced it for themselves will understand. As such, metaphors offer a communication tool to express meaning through like or approximate experiences. The use of metaphors is a limitation of the study in the sense that participants may not have had the words to fully communicate the experience that we sought to understand. Alternatively, readers who have not themselves experienced a placement move may not be able to fully grasp the meaning conveyed by the quotes presented in this report.

### **4.2 LAYOUT OF ALUMNI QUOTES**

The content findings of this study are presented according to the four major questions posed by the study:

- How do foster care alumni remember the experience of placement moves?
- What lasting impressions or impact did multiple placement moves have on foster care alumni?



- How do foster care alumni define a placement move?
- What advice do foster care alumni have to offer—foster children, foster parents and caseworkers—about how to best handle a placement move?

As mentioned earlier, participant's age, gender, race and number of moves did not have bearing on how alumni recalled their placement move experiences, nor the language used to describe those memories.

To protect the confidentiality of research participants, interview quotes are identified by only three characteristics: number of moves (including number of returns home), age category (i.e., 18 to 19, 21 to 22, 26 to 31, 37 to 40, 43 to 53, and 60+ years old), and race (i.e., African-American, Biracial, Caucasian, Hispanic and Native American). Gender was omitted as an identifier but it is important to note that all the age categories created had at least one male participant. Race was included as an identifier because it is a well know fact that, children of color are disproportionately represented in the system of care. By including race as a label on participant quotes, we hope to show that in our sample of 22, alumni participants remembered placement moves in similar ways regardless of their race.





## 5. HOW DO FOSTER CARE ALUMNI REMEMBER THE EXPERIENCE OF PLACEMENT MOVES?

The memories held by alumni years after leaving care provides helpful insights about the nature of the placement move experience. Since the 22 research participants of this project experienced placement moves independent of one another—at different times, in different places, with different people—it was remarkable to learn that many memories of the move experience were similar. As mentioned previously, the participant’s age, race, gender, or number of moves experienced did not seem to have much effect on how placement moves were remembered.

*Figure 1*

*Interview Questions about Remembering*

- Thinking about your total experience in foster care, how “big a deal” was moving from one placement to another when you were living in care?
- What was the best or easiest thing about moving from one placement to another that you remember? Was there anything positive that came from moving from one placement to another?
- What was the most difficult or hardest thing about moving from one placement to another that you remember? Was there anything negative that came from moving from one placement to another?

Three main interview questions were asked to help study participants remember their placement move experiences (see Figure 1). We purposely asked alumni to remember the positive and negative aspects of moving in an effort to generate a balanced picture. However, moving from one foster care placement to another was remembered mostly as a traumatic event associated with significant losses and a point in time where alumni “shut down” or withdrew from other people. Antidotes to the negative effects of moving were the memory of a nurturing or caring adult and a sense of hopefulness for something better.

Overall, the four main themes that emerged in participant responses were: loss, a time of shutting down, memory of a caring adult, and guarded optimism. In this section, we present the quotes and excerpts of interview transcripts that led us to arrive at these main themes, which are presented in order of frequency.

### 5.1 LOSS

A strong theme in the interview responses was the memory of placement moves as a time of experiencing loss. More specifically, a sense of loss was associated in six major areas, which we called: loss of power over ones personal destiny, loss of friends and connections with school, loss of self-esteem, loss of normalcy, loss of personal belongings, and loss of (or separation from ) siblings.



### 5.1.1 Loss of Power over Personal Destiny

“Not knowing.” Most alumni remembered placement moves as an experience where they had no control or influence in decisions or events of their lives. Below we list direct quotes that describe how moving from one placement to another was an experience into the unknown—as one alumnus remarked” “You don’t know the who, what, where, when or why.” Another noteworthy comment was made by the most senior alumnus who remarked that “moving is part of the whole system.” For foster youth who experience multiple moves, this indeed is their experience and is quite different from youth who do not experience multiple placements. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** Initially it was a very big deal because I didn’t know where I was going or who would be there or how they would treat me, the environment I was in...
- **[28+ moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** it was the unknown of how long I would stay somewhere else and with whom and who was I going to be. I never got to set any goals because life always took over. I found I was always living in chaos and just surviving.
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** It happened as soon as I got settled. I moved. I’d adjust and readjust, just when I got comfortable I had to move. It was really hard. You don’t have a say in it.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** I didn’t know what would happen next...I never knew what was going on. I was in limbo..didn’t know where I was going, didn’t know if I was staying. I never knew.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** It was uncomfortable. You don’t know these people you don’t want to talk about nothing, you’re scared and they are nosey. ... I guess it is good though. I just got comfortable moving
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** frustrating...having your freedom taken away, to basically sum it up.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]**You are going from the known to unknown. Just imagine changing jobs every two weeks and how unsettling that would be, and that is just changing jobs. Every time you change you don’t know what the people will be like. Like stupid things, you don’t know the food, the smells,.. Every situation is a whole kaleidoscope of new thing to adjust to. You are the one who adjusts, the family doesn’t adjust. The family has the same job, same school etc. You are the one who makes most of the adjustments
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** It was kinda hard to get used to different placements. I remember one that was very hard ‘cause I did not want to move. ....You don’t know the who, what, where, when or why.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]**...not knowing what you were walking into. What adjustments, expectations, what the people were like. The whole school situation... you can’t establish relationships, have friends. I had one move where they didn’t tell me I was moving. I was at school...got a call to come to the office...when I got to the office, the social worker was there. I got in the Social Worker’s car and all my clothes were in the car....I was leaving my brother, my friend and had no chance to say goodbye to the foster parents. ...It was like I was being moved to a foreign country.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** The whole system was bad, you could never get roots. Moving was part of the whole system. ... They just put us where



they could put us....The hurt, the pain. You don't know where you're going, or what will it be like.

- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Moves were usually traumatic. Not good experiences. Um, they usually happened in the middle of night. It was a bad emotional and physical event. I usually ran away from a bad situation. I would run to a police station and they would call my caseworker. I went into a temp home, it was a house with 10 kids or so, where I would stay for two weeks 'til they found me a placement. I always ran to the authorities so I was never really a "run away".
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** The uncertainty, the trying to fit in all again, not really knowing the rules ...not knowing the expectations... a big thing was not knowing what to call people ... The suddenness of it. No preparation. All of a sudden pack your bags your leaving. No time to mentally prepare of get all your things... wonder what you did wrong... and things like that.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** ...I wasn't expecting it ...my foster mom, she wanted the move. It was really kinda hard for me.... scared to know how everything is going to go, if everything is be alright, how will they act towards you, will you like them or not...
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** They were all shocking and really hard .... even re-unification was like an emergency it was handled like an emergency like we had no knowledge of anything it just happened. ....The hardest thing of moving to placement to placement I think the uncertainty is the hardest part you know the feeling of being in the dark and not knowing what's going to happen next
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** You're moving your whole life. Changing your whole life, a different lifestyle. Starting over different...It got better, but it was hard to be moved from place to place, knowing that I would be with different people, different families that I might know only for a short time, or maybe for a long time, or maybe forever... its really all that not knowing, who you will be with and most times it is not good.

### 5.1.2. Loss of Friends and Connection with School

For many alumni a placement move disrupted ties to friends and school. The loss associated with friendships affected both established friends left behind, as well as opportunity to make new friends at the next placement. Moving multiple times compounded the challenges of keeping old friends and making new ones. For most alumni, the lack of stability in placement meant discontinuity in school and disruptions with friends. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** ...a big thing is that foster kids feel excluded enough as it is. You are an outcast, excluded at school.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Changing schools .... You never made connections or friends 'cause you were never there long.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** Just about every year I was going to a different school and trying to fit in – having no friends...
- **[9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Constantly changing school – I think my education suffered.... Having no close friends because you knew you would be moving again.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** ... losing all your friends at one place...



- [20+ *moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian*] .... loss of school friends, nothing good comes from[moving], unless you were in an abusive situation.
- [6 *moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American*]... You make friends, but at a new place you pretty much have to start all over.
- [6 *moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American*] The whole school situation...you can't establish relationships have friends.
- [3 *moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] It was a totally different school district...It tore me away from everybody I knew...
- [33+ *moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian*] It is hard to make friends, you're always moving. One year in 4th grade I was in 3 different homes and schools. How do you make friends? The only friends I can remember were the kids in the orphanages, they would be coming back too, so you see them again.
- [4 *moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian*] Changing schools was hard....making new friends was hard.
- [3 *moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] The whole different change, schools... a whole different school. Having to leave friends behind.
- [5 *moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian*] changing schools and saying goodbye... to all your friends and stuff.

### 5.1.3. Loss of Self-Esteem

Many alumni remembered the move experience as a time of feeling “unwanted”. Many seemed to internalize this rejection by questioning what was wrong with them, or wondering about what they did to prevent them from staying in one place. There is no doubt that other aspects of the foster care experience, including the reasons that led up to placement in foster care, also contribute to loss of self-esteem. However, alumni responses suggest that the move experience may be an event that isolates and intensifies this downward spiral leading to loss of self-esteem. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- [13+ *moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American*] Everyone knows (in the neighborhood) that is the foster home. So, you already have the chips stacked up against you, especially when you are a young person....feel like misfits. What is wrong with me? ...They might as well have slapped a barcode on my neck
- [9+ *moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian*] Kids feel like it is their fault they have to leave. Feel excluded. I was blamed. I was the bad one. You are an outcast, excluded at school.
- [4 *moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] I felt like I was being punished. I just needed someone to care about me.
- [28+ *moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American*] What is wrong with me? Why does no one want me? Why can't I stay in one place?
- [8 *moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial*] ...Feel more like a guinea pig or some kind of an animal than a human being. You get all the attention and affection at first and then later, its like, Oh I am done with you.
- [4 *moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic*] made me more insecure... Didn't fit in. Foster care made my shyness worse. It was not a great self-esteem builder for me.
- [20+ *moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian*]... a feeling of rejection, of not being wanted, and also a sense of being disconnected. ... It is full of chaos, and



abandonment. Any relationship that breaks down at the core someone always feels that they have failed.

- [33+ *moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian*] Being unwanted and feeling like you were unwanted. Every time you felt like you were making progress you lost it. ...They don't want you....You got to the point where you did not even care anymore. Being unwanted and feeling like you were unwanted...
- [6 *moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian*] Everybody had preconceived ideas about foster care and foster kids. We weren't bad kids. We were not delinquent, and it wasn't true in our case. I overcame stereotypes.
- [4 *moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian*]<sup>10</sup> The uncertainty, the trying to fit in again....Wondering what you did wrong.
- [3 *moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] ...[the foster mother] made it seem like[the move] was all my fault. That was hard.
- [6 *moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] People kind of treated you negatively or had lower expectations. I was treated very differently after being labeled a foster kid by the school system. ... I would be treated worse if people knew[that I was a foster child]. And I have um two siblings who refused to admit that they were in care ...some people...are extremely offended by the whole idea being identified that way ...
- [13 *moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial*] I think sometimes when there is a problem and they move you, dang, your self-esteem is just a little low, you think could I have done something better, ...was it my fault?

#### 5.1.4. Loss of Normalcy

Beyond self-esteem, alumni commented how moves added to the stigma of being in foster care. Alumni comments suggest that not only did they feel different from “normal” but that they were also living outside the “range of normal.” The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- [13+ *moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American*]....adjusting to society that I was going into as far as friends. That is always the hardest thing, because usually when you go into foster care the house on the block that is the foster home. Everyone knows that is the foster home. ... You go to school or you just go out into the neighborhood out and about just trying to be a kid. Most times you are reminded of your situation by somebody. That kind of has a tendency to feel like a misfit, but again you take that and you stuff that. ... these young people... they feel like misfits, what is wrong with me? That my parents didn't want me. ...Once a birth family or mother or whatever makes the decision to pass her child ...What she is doing is she is casting an ill-equipped young person out into the world to fend for themselves. That is the worse thing that any human being can do to another.
- [9+ *moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian*] Kids feel like it is their fault they have to leave. Feel excluded. I was blamed. I was the bad one. You are an outcast, excluded at school.
- [28+ *moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American*] Once I began to realize what normal people do and compare myself to them I learned to lie to myself and others about who and what I was.
- [8 *moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial*] ...You feel more like a guinea pig or some kind of an animal than a human being



- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** Even if they tried to welcome you, I just felt alone. You kind of feel like that you don't fit it.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** When in foster care you still go to school with other kids who have normal lives and go to school with you. You are very aware your life is not normal. ... You always feel different. Other people don't do that.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Being unwanted and feeling like you were unwanted. You see other children play and be happy and you are not happy.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Everybody had preconceived ideas about foster care and foster kids. We weren't bad kids. We were not delinquent, and it wasn't true in our case. I overcame stereotypes.
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]**.... trying to fit in, again....Wondering what you did wrong.
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I was treated very differently after being labeled a foster kids by the school system... whether you're moved or not the school system always labeled you, even if you were re-unified you were still a foster kid or your home was at risk and people kind of treated you negatively or had lower expectations.

#### 5.1.5. Loss of Personal Belongings

Many alumni remembered either losing personal possessions during a move transition or recalled the risk of having their possessions stolen or end up missing. One of our foster care experts pointed out that when a foster child's personal possessions are lost in a move transition, the child loses not only the personal item but also the link to memories associated with that item. For foster children on the move, personal items can act as memory keepers and when the item is lost, so is the potential to trigger any memories associated with it. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Everything got left behind. You end up only with the clothes on your back when you go from place to place. .... I was losing everything you had....Your stuff was all you had. It is tough being a teenager when you don't have clothes.
- **[28+ moves with "many" returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]**... you take all your belongings you can carry, if in a hurry or not, and you know once you leave you are never coming back.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Losing some of your things, like your brand new clothes, people stealing your stuff, it is frustrating.
- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** ...basically I placed everything into one bag and it was all the same.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** I had to get rid of some things I had too many things that I had to get rid of. Extra stuff I needed, pair of clothes, radios, sound system, model cars, just like a whole bunch of junk that you don't really need, model stuff, model planes. I don't like people touching my stuff, I don't like people helping me move personally cause things come up missing. I tell people don't touch my stuff.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I usually lost everything I owned. There was never any packing involved (laugh) You never had to take anything, you just went.



- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** with each move, packing up was easy cause we only had so much stuff to begin with.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** The packing. We did not have very much. Put it all in a paper bag and go! I usually lost everything I owned.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I don't have anything. I know a lot of things of mine came up missing in that first foster home. I do keep track of things even in my own home now. I do keep better track of things. I lost, got stolen, some things I really loved at that foster home.

### 5.1.6 Loss of (Separation from) Siblings

Our interview questions did not ask anything about siblings. As such, we do not have any information about how many alumni had siblings, the quality of those relationships, or what role siblings had in placement moves. Nevertheless, one-third of alumni remarked on the significance of siblings in the placement move experience. The comments made about siblings suggest that connection to siblings provided some sense of familiarity and connection that was otherwise not available in the placement move experience. For example, moving to a new placement with a sibling or to be reunited with one seemed to provide an emotional or psychological buffer to the effects of loss. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** It was scary but my big brother was with me and my sister was already in the foster home that adopted me...
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** It was hard because I had 2 brothers and 9 times out of 10 we couldn't be together. I would have to move in with a stranger....I was shy back then so it was difficult.
- **[9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** I am the oldest of six children. The youngest twins were immediately adopted out and the four of us were sometimes kept together, other times split up. I am grateful that foster homes and children's homes made attempts to keep us in contact with each other.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** The first 3 homes I was too young and don't remember...I didn't have a reaction to it. Let me see...3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> home was an experience because I was a runaway...my brother and I were in the same home, then we were split so I was constantly running trying to find him. ... I was leaving my brother, my friend and had no chance to say goodbye to the foster parents.... It was like I was being moved to a foreign country. ...I was excited because it was a move to be with my brother
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I'd say probably the most difficult or hardest part from moving out of the placements was the second and third foster home even though they were within the same school district was that I was moving away from my sister... even though I can only stand to be around her for about an hour and then we want to kill each other.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** My brother and I were severe ADD but in those days they didn't know about it or how to treat it. I don't know if I could have put up with me..... It might have been our fault. Sometime I was leaving my brother and sister. We were split sometimes. Even though I thought my brother was a pain in the ass, he was still my brother.



- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** The feelings that I have with seeing my brothers and my sisters now is very special to me.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** ...I got used to [new placement] cause one of my sisters was in the home I was going to so I adapted more.

## 5.2 TIME OF SHUTTING DOWN

Beyond the many losses, alumni remembered placement moves as a point of “giving up,” “disconnecting,” “detaching” or “withdrawing” from people. It seems likely that becoming socially withdrawn was a consequence of the many losses experienced. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]**...but after a while I shut everything down emotionally and things didn't matter... you don't want to come apart around strangers, so you just put up a thick skin, which makes it hard for people to get through. The whole experience of that is what it does is it starts to make you numb.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** When I ended up moving, I decided that I wasn't going to trust any more families. I wasn't going to call them Mom or anything. Each [foster] home I had the hopes of being adopted. At my first foster home, I thought I was going to stay for my whole time. Then I would start trusting them. Each time I'd trust people, and then I feel like you get kicked in the face.
- **[28+ moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** Moving as many times as I did makes you think none of these people like me, that perhaps there is a reason and you become insecure. How can someone be happy moving all the time, especially if it happens a lot and is different every time. Usually, I left my homes on not the greatest of terms because it was easier to be angry at someone and leave than to miss them terribly..... And, the worst is when you finally find a place you actually like and want to stay and set down strong roots, but for some reason they do not want you, it really hurts and you think, “what's wrong with me, why does no one want me and why can't I stay in one place.”
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** As soon as I would start to get attached it seemed like I would end up moving, so I pretty much became nonchalant about everything. After every move it became harder to try and care for somebody. After every move, a piece of me was left there, left behind. ...went in feeling a lot more lonely that I did before.
- **[9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Didn't form close relationships cause I knew I would be moving again.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** They [foster parents] were putting me down. That was the hardest. They were negative. It was difficult to meet new people. Getting to know the kids you lived with was difficult.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** I was probably thinking ah man I have to move here and how long would I be here for and asking my caseworker how long....
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** the negative comes from the fact that you have to learn how the new foster family would react or act towards you and how you need to act towards them. And get basically all the family politics of that new home, of that new foster family.



- [33+ *moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian*] 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. You got to the point where you did not even care anymore. Being unwanted and feeling like you were unwanted...
- [6 *moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian*] I was able to turn off all the emotional stuff and leave with nothing....I was recently in a not good marriage and from my experience growing up, I knew it was bad and I had to get out of it. I was able to turn off all the emotional stuff and leave, with nothing. I did this repeatedly as a kid so I knew I would be all right to take nothing and start all over.
- [6 *moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] I never attached. ... I learned not to trust anybody but myself you know I extremely detached from any caretaker that I ever had purposefully cause that was my survival technique.
- [13 *moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial*] It was hard having to adapt. Hard having to change your life again, and moving in with people you don't know is kinda hard at first. There are problems sometimes with different foster families. You don't get to pick who you are with, and you don't know who they really are when you get moved and stuff. Basically you have to change your lifestyle and figure out who you are living with, and try to get through that part I guess, I don't know...

### 5.3 MEMORY OF A CARING ADULT

Amidst the mostly painful memories of placement moves lingered recollections of nurturing or caring adults that seemed to anchor a positive memory and provide a source of strength. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- [9+ *moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian*] If I look back at foster care, the thing that impacted me the most is having my caseworker there and still talking to her today. Another thing is kind of an after the fact...the foster family that I consider my family...they tell me that I am always their kid. They say that about the kids they take in....that they will always be there for them.
- [28+ *moves with "many" returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American*] I do have one [foster parent] that somehow hangs on...she is a good friend who doesn't pass judgment on me and has always thought I can be whatever I want to be.
- [4 *moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic*] I remember the second home when they were taking me there that the caseworker was real happy, Real happy. And it was for the best.
- [9 *moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian*] My first foster mother was Mom "A" and she was so warm and loving and wanted to adopt my sister and me but the court wouldn't allow it. I kept in contact with her right up until she died. I think her nurturing made an impact on me.
- [7 *moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian*] Some of my moves were pretty good. One foster home was so good I did not want to move from there. They kept the girl who ran away with me. That kind of hurt.
- [6 *moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American*] The last move I didn't really want to move but I left foster care shortly after that. My time in foster care was a pretty positive I guess. I didn't have to experience the bad things I saw other kids experience. I had good foster parents. At one point my biological mom said you seem



to like your foster parents better than your real parents, and at the time she probably was right.

- [9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American] Um, you know I can think of certificates that I still have right now, art contests, talent shows, Six Flags.
- [33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian] I do feel that if not for the last family I would have end in prison. They straightened me out. They got foster parent of the year award. If not for these people caring, this conversation would probably not be taking place. The first thing she did with my clothes when I came to live with them was burn them, and tell the society she wanted money for new clothes for me. She was strong willed and was concerned for children, it changed the whole picture.
- [3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian] Bad memories about the bad foster home. With my good foster home, I had vacations, I was friends with my good foster home. She is basically my mother. That is what I consider her to be.
- [5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian] One thing, the first foster mom was a churchy lady. She did stuff with us. I got along with her. I could talk to her. I liked the last one too. She knew kids. She was like on our level. I was doing ok in those two foster homes. She would talk with us. She did not just yell at us.
- [6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian] Both good and bad like I, I still have um one of the things that my foster mom did with me and my sisters is she was kind of a crafty person ... and a lot of my first experiences doing anything socially outside of school were done while in foster care ... so those were the good things.

## 5.4 GUARDED OPTIMISM

Our interview question asking about the “best” or “easiest” part of moving drew many pauses and hesitations from participants. Participants seemed to convey a sense of guarded optimism in both the tone and content of their replies. The theme of guarded optimism as part of the tone of interviews was discussed in Section 4. The theme also appeared in the content of the interviews as participants recalled specific memories. Rather than refer to positive or pleasant memories, participants talked about the “good” as a chance to get away from a “bad” placement. They also shared memories of feeling hopeful for something better—by either connecting more with others or getting a chance to learn or experience something new. Perhaps because alumni had less to say about the “upside” of placement moves, their replies did not easily distill into one common theme. Thus, the following three sub-themes emerged.

### 5.4.1 Leaving a Bad Placement

The event of moving wasn’t always something to be avoided. Many alumni commented on the best thing about a move was leaving a “bad” placement. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- [13+moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American] The best thing was that I was not going to be in the place that I was leaving.
- [4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic] The fact that I wouldn’t live in that foster home anymore and was going to go to a different school.



- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** A couple of homes I was really glad to be leaving.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** I don't know if anything was positive... It allowed me to see the places I moved to were not nearly as bad I saw others (foster kids) move to. ...I knew I was lucky compared to the other kids.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Well in the first move it was out of that foster home from having so many foster kids, to having only two in the foster home with going to the second foster home.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** ... some of the places you were getting out. Like getting out of prison I guess... sometimes you looked forward to the orphanage from some of these homes.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** The best thing was to get out of the bad foster home. I wanted more one on one and there were too many teens and adults [in the previous home].

### 5.4.2 Connecting with People

Some alumni remembered the event of moving as a catalyst for connecting with people—either new people, caseworkers or in two instances being reunited with siblings. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Ummmm...pause. I guess...knowing that I really trusted my caseworker. Knowing that she would take care of me. She stayed with me the whole time. And, I still have contact with her.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** Um... Not sure, not best but, the easiest thing was that the people tried to make me feel welcome, that made the transition easier.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** My brother...It made it easier with him [being at the new placement]
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** If there was ...pause...it was maybe thinking that my parents would get their act together but that never seemed to happen.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** ...from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> home I was excited because it was a move to be with my brother.

### 5.4.3 Chance to Start Over

For several alumni, the move marked an opportunity for them to reinvent themselves or a chance to learn from new situations. A move to a new home provided some alumni a chance to start with a clean slate or a new view on how other people lived. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Um.... The best thing was probably meeting different people, the different people you were living with and.... Trying to get more support, get even more support than what you did before.



- [**6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian**] ....I could be somebody else and the public wouldn't know it, so I treated that as an experience to become a new person and that was a positive experience...
- [**4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian**] Hmm... (pause) that's tough. Probably the fact that nobody knew you. You had the chance to start over, even though it mostly failed. But it was not really easy or good.
- [**8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial**] Easy? Got to experience different lifestyles, different parenting, and different family styles.
- [**9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian**] Meeting new people was a plus rather than a negative. I learned to adapt to the home I was in. I was exposed to many faiths- Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Congregational.
- [**7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian**] From my point of view I got to see all different kids and different lifestyles. It was an education. I learned how to raise my kids different then I was raised. One house was black. One was multi race, and then you got living with younger people, or older people, and all diff kinds of kids. Handicapped, bad kids and you have to understand what their backgrounds are too.





## 6. WHAT LASTING IMPRESSIONS OR IMPACT DID MULTIPLE PLACEMENT MOVES HAVE ON FOSTER CARE ALUMNI?

Three interview questions asked about the impressions of past placement moves on the lives of alumni today (see Figure 2). Again, we purposely asked questions that would have alumni reflect on positive and negative impacts in an effort to generate a balanced picture. Most alumni tied placement moves in the past to having difficulty trusting other people today. A wariness of others seemed to be at the heart of present-day relationship challenges such as maintaining “safe-distance” from others, living a transient lifestyle, and managing mental and emotional health challenges.

### 6.1 TRUST ISSUES

Mistrust or lacking the ability to trust other people was a strong underlying theme when participants considered how placement move experiences, in the past, affect them today. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

Figure 2

#### Interview Questions about Lasting Impression

- Do you think that your experiences of moving from one foster placement to another impact how you relate to other people today? If so, how?
- Do you have any behaviors or personal habits that you think were caused by the multiple placement changes that you experienced in foster care? What habits have you developed that add to the quality of your life? What habits have you developed that take away from the quality of life?
- When you think about total number of placement moves that you experienced during your stay in foster care, what lasting impressions/memories stick with you to this day?

- [9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian] Yes. Well... the biggest thing is trust issues. I know I have already mentioned it three times. But in my relationships today...it is like not knowing if they are going to end up leaving me.
- [8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]...it made it real difficult to trust people (laughs nervously)... I have become more guarded cause I get so scared to lose somebody. It takes me a long time to drop my guard... It is difficult to trust and expect someone to be nice to me. As soon as they are nice to me, I automatically think they want something. I become really defensive. It made it difficult for me to become attached. It made it so that after every move a piece of me was left there, left behind. I felt like walking into another placement went in feeling a lot more lonely than I did before. I'd become more and more incomplete after every placement. Eventually I became an angry, angry person who couldn't trust anybody. To any person who would try and help me I would become defensive, and throw up my guard because I would not know what their intentions were.
- [13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American] So, if you are moving from place to place and person to person these people now become liars to you and after you move to it doesn't take many 2 or 3 or 4 homes is all it can take now to destroy your trust for a long, long time. You may not even know it until later on in life. You may not realize you have a serious trust factor that you don't trust people ...The lack of trust. That's a huge, huge, huge defining part of the human psyche's trust and trust is like a huge, huge tree with many, many branches that stretch off into so many elements of your life. Trust lack of it.



- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** If I could find someone to talk with or trust, I think my life would be easier, but history teaches me not to trust. I say “Ill figure it out. Forget it”. I don’t let my spouse help. I make it harder. I don’t want to trust him to do it. I do it alone. .It makes quality of life more difficult.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Trusting. Trust.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** Wariness. Tend toward being aware of what is going on.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** Trust. Not readily establishing relationships. I can be abrupt....
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** You wouldn’t want to be truthful because you wouldn’t be sure how they would use that against you.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** I am not shy around other people, but it is hard for me to trust anybody if they have lied to me one time. I was lied to so much as a kid. I still have a hard time if someone messes one time with my trust. I find it hard to trust them again.
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I have trust issues. I have a “don’t trust anybody” type of attitude.
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I do have a hard time trusting people right away....Oh yeah I learned not to trust either of my parents like I completely detached from them um and I know that’s not typical behavior for parents and kids so and um I had a very hard time dating, trusting a partner you know a person that was going to be sticking with me for a long period of time that was a scary idea um I always told everybody that I was never going to get married or have any kids ever, but so no it didn’t turn out that way at all.
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** It makes you sort of not be able to trust a lot of people. ....I trust people, but I could be more trusting. ... I went into a lot of foster homes but I really wasn’t able to get close to any of them, except one. I did not really get along with them.

## 6.2 “SAFE DISTANCING” IN RELATIONSHIPS

Beyond having trust issues, alumni talked about challenges with building and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Many alumni spoke about keeping a “safe distance” from others either by not allowing people too close or by living a transient or loner lifestyle. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]**...and because you don’t’ trust people when you get close to someone you are subconsciously sabotaging that relationship because inside you think it is not real, they will leave me, or they will find something wrong with me because that is the way it goes.... It’s hard for me to get close to people, most people get close to me that’s you know cause I’m pretty laid back, but for me now to get close to people that is a difficult thing, cause of my youth and going through this system.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** If I get too close or they get too close to me. I’ll push them away because I think that I’ll lose them anyway. Like my boyfriend right now. We are getting to the point of getting close. Without meaning too...I’ll get mad at him. It affects the relationship. I’ll pull back and won’t call as much. I do things that don’t directly affect the relationship but over time it does.



- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I don't like to depend on others. I can push people away. I find myself pushing people away; I don't want to depend on someone, just in case.
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Most definitely. Um... because when I move from one home to another it was real difficult. I would have abandonment issues. Any time I became close to someone, from the experience of moving from home to another home, caused me to think that everyone was going to leave me, one way or another.
- **[9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** I find I didn't try to form close relationships because I knew I would be moving again and I find it difficult to open up.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** It does affect relationships when you are in foster care. You don't know how to treat somebody because you never got the right affection... you don't know how to treat a friend or boyfriend. You don't know how to treat that person. It is hard to keep a stable family if you don't know what a normal family is. It affects all these relationships. I went through a lot of relationship things.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** I have to give a qualified answer. I have learned to adapt. There is always a little of wariness and mistrust. The difference of a 15 year old and being 30 is that I am aware of distrust. If you learn to adapt you can manage your problems. You don't welcome other people with open arms very often.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** I wouldn't let people get close. I'd be afraid I would get dumped. I did not know if things would be moving or what would happen. ... Um... uh, I think for many years I was very, very insecure, and I think that happens with all foster kids, from moving around all the time. Today I feel myself feeling insecure about things as far as relationships with people. I take each day as it comes. I have a habit of not planning too far ahead.
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I am not demonstrative or affectionate with other adults. I can be with children but not with adults. I am conservative to a fault.
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Like even my poor spouse you know, I purposefully did bad things to try to get my spouse to leave me because I wanted to feel like I couldn't trust anybody and ...when my spouse kept forgiving me it kind of ticked me off. I think that I've had a tendency to buck authority you know I've had I think I've struggled a little bit in the job market cause I push to hard with some people and I've burned probably a few more bridges than I you know really should have and I have a very strong personality.... Like you know I think that my life would probably be much more fulfilling if I would allow more people into my life you know I'm really picky about who I allow in my life and even today you know.
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Yeah, it kinda makes you angry sometimes, that you can't relate [to people] the way you should. It makes you angry at other people too...You don't really know how to have a relationship when people are introduced in and out of your life. It's not about being willing, it is basically just something that happens....As far as being able to open up to just anybody, like most people could go to a counselor, or anybody, I feel a little closed off. I don't really want to open up to people who I know are not going to be in my life forever, or at least not for a while.



### 6.3 TRANSIENT OR LONER LIFESTYLE

For some alumni, living through multiple placement moves, during their childhood in foster care, was tied to their descriptions in adulthood of the transient or loner lifestyle. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** You generally don't create as many attachments. Even as an adult I only have one close friend. I don't believe, as an adult, that I don't want friends because they are going to leave. It is easier to take care of yourself and your family. The less you attach the less you have to deal with. I don't want to spend energy. It is not worth it. I only have one or two friends I would take time to get involved with. .. A lot of people I meet their problems seem trivial. I want to say it could be worse.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** You're not comfortable in one place, you're bound to move. You don't know what to call home. I never stay in one place. I moved four times in the past years. It does affect you. You don't know what to call home. Especially when you get into a relationship. It is hard to stay in one place. I moved from the time I was two, even before foster care. It has been unstable. I moved so much. I can't stay in one place.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** Yes. Well I'm basically a loner other than my children. I have colleagues and associates but have established few friends....In my adult life I have moved around a lot. My daughter has reminded me of that. I've had to make a conscious effort not to move. It has had that impact.
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** When I finally became an adult I moved every year. When the lease was up I moved and didn't realize I was doing that for a long time. My friends would tease me and say "the light bulbs have burnt out, it is time to move" (laughs).
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Um... I never really get comfortable in one place. I always know I will be moving someday. That is how it is.

### 6.4 MANAGING EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

Many alumni talked about struggles with managing emotions or mental health issues in their present day lives. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[28+ moves with "many" returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** My spouse says, and I agree, that I am super sensitive and can't handle off comments...I become very distant and rehash the insignificant issues, making more out of them than they really are, and I become standoffish. ... I am extremely sensitive and rehash insignificant events and become angry....I am bitter and resentful most of the time.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** ....I had a lot of anger growing up. I used to be very angry inside. At the drop of a hat I would fight with somebody. Eating. Anger, I don't have as much as I used too. I am impatient sometimes. Age mellows you. ....I am always asking Lord why me? I will never find out but I am always asking...
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** ...a good friend says he has a rheostat and when the rollercoaster of life goes up or down he turns his emotions up or down. I have on or off switches. Most people go up or down, I go on or off. When emotionally things get rough, I turn my emotions off. When I have had too much I turn



it off and I am done. The emotion is turned off. Like with my spouse. I moved out. I was done and I have no feeling whatsoever. My spouse does not understand. When I am done I am done. That was my survival technique when I was growing up and I guess I still use it.

- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I would say that when I have relationships it is easy for me to cut people off and “bam” they are out of my life. Or I get in an argument with someone and I assume that’s it. Its over. Also I have had long periods of depression. I have had job loss because of depression. When I graduated from high school, fourth in my class and had scholarships, but I was so glad to be out of the system that I didn’t go. I am going now.
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I’m still fighting even when there isn’t something to fight about it’s just innate. It’s really I don’t know if I can explain it, but I guess I’m always looking for something to go wrong and I’m always ready for it you know and um I think I’m also hypersensitive when I hear you know a comment and the person might not have even meant it to be derogatory ... so if somebody says something to me that I take offensively it’s harder for me to just fully embrace that person again. My strategy is just to kind of slowly and nicely get away from it. I know that many foster kids just blow up and that’s just not my style I’m one of those really quiet people who find a way to gracefully bow out. But I am always looking for something to go wrong and I’m very hyper even now in my job right now. I still kind of wonder you know how important am I really. Stuff that I don’t think most people would care about or “think” on, but I’m thinking on it cause I’m just hypersensitive.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** Not telling the truth sometimes, poor hygiene and picking up things that aren't mine.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** Um stress, anxiety, that is it, frustration, I didn’t have no mood disorder, like bipolar.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** ...chronic insomniac....Also, I’m told that I can be abrupt even though I don’t intend to be. I’m told that I am direct.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Actually, I have been really depressed most of my life. My mom died. Moving so much and then all the things that happened. I had a problem with hurting myself, from moving so much. Moving so much, even with family it is hard, but with foster care, meeting strangers and new families all of the time was hard....I hate moving.

## 6.5 “POSITIVE” LIFE LESSONS FROM MULTIPLE PLACEMENT MOVES

A remarkable aspect of the research was finding that while foster alumni seem to recall the experience of placement moves and its negative impact in similar ways, the positive lessons or personal strength derived from the experience was unique to individuals. For example, individual characteristics used by alumni to describe themselves included: creative, independent, compulsive, articulate about their own needs, more tolerant of life, outgoing and friendly, respectful of others, being prepared, having strong survival skills, remembering a specific foster parent, being a mentor to foster children, and being an expert packer. With the exception of being “an expert packer” most personal strengths were general in nature and did not seem to directly tie to the experience of placement moves.



## 6.5.1 Individual Strengths

Participants identified various unique strengths that characterized them as individuals. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** Creative, I am extremely creative. What I used to do is before I learned that my rage would get me into trouble I would take my rage and I would create I would draw I would paint I would write poetry I would play guitar I would play piano. I would do something opposite of what I felt like doing and what I felt like doing most times because of the environment and the situation I had been placed in would have been negative, would have been destructive, would have been hurtful. So, I figured anything that I did that was contrary to those feelings was alright and I didn't care what anybody thought.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I am independent. ... I am self-sufficient and independent. It is not always good but mostly is....My brother and sister have all the problems in the world. I feel lucky, and sometimes guilty that I have my sanity and all.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]**... I am particular when it comes to leaving a hotel I check everywhere I am sure that I have all of my stuff with me. I check everywhere. It is almost compulsive. I never thought of it until now but it is true. I don't want to leave my stuff behind. I am careful to keep my stuff close. It is kind of important. I work hard for what I have. I went through a lot to get what I have.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** I attend a Christian Youth in Action Training every June and teach 5-day Clubs in the summer with children...I am very good at teaching little children Bible and Missionary Stories.
- **[28+ moves with "many" returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** Articulating how I feel and expecting that I am important enough that they be addressed
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** It helped me become more tolerant of life. Moving from one home to another—stuff happens, you have to deal with unexpected things. You have to deal with it with a smile on your face.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** I know that I don't want that [foster care] for my kids..... It built me up in strength. I can stand up for myself.
- **[9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** I'm very outgoing and friendly.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** I am a better person than I was before, respectful, smarter. I have a lot of knowledge, seen nasty things, heard nasty things, experienced all kinds of things. I been through everything.....that helped me to be the person I am today, helped my with independent living skills, how to treat people, things you should and shouldn't say to the certain people, some things will get your head knocked off. Out here it's everybody for yourself. I try to be cool with everybody, I like to make friends, I am a person that likes to do nice things for people, it's not always about me, me, me. Do a good deed, you know, pay it forward. I am a person that likes to do nice things for people.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** I think that I have habit of trying to be prepared for everything now. From the years of insecurity, and not knowing what was going to happen, I try to be prepared for anything that might come along.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** I think I have strong survival skills. I can accept change more so than a lot of other people. Change doesn't bother me...well I shouldn't say that I mean that adjust better. I learned how to pack real well (laughs).



- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** None...(long pause) I guess maybe becoming a foster parent is a positive thing that came out of it.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** I see other kids that are in foster homes, and I like talking to them cause I been through that. It helps me talk with them. It makes me want to be a better parent so my kids don't have to go through foster care. I am having a baby. Things like that.
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I think not only does fighting hurt me, but it helps me because I don't give up on tasks that I you know are giving to me to do in a workplace situation I don't give up on stuff and I think that's a really big strength ...I do a lot of stuff on my own. I prefer you know for people to give me stuff and let me run with it I hate micro-management cause I don't want people attaching themselves to me.
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Other than not trusting and all of that, I could probably pack a suitcase as fast as anybody. (laughs)

Overall, individual perceived strengths or positive habits did not gel into natural categories. However, two small groupings that did emerge are presented below. Overall, it seems that while the harms of multiple foster care placements may be something shared in common by foster alumni, their capacity to cope and learn from the experience varies from individual to individual.

### 6.5.2 Exposed to Difference

The most frequently cited “positive” reflection of multiple placement move experiences was the idea that living with many families provided alumni a unique viewpoint of family life and opportunity to interact with many different types of people. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** It helps get along with different people.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** Yeah I am sure that I can relate to other people, how I got where I got today you know having my own apartment and living on my own....
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]**...with those moves and with the other things that I've done, you can kind of learn how to read people, so to say. Well, not really read them, but how to work with them or how to work against them, depending on what they want to do. And also apply that to other things in your life.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** Um... I think in some ways it made me more compassionate toward other people. You get to see how different people's lives are and kind of relate to them.
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]**... I was strategic in who I decided my friends were going to be when I moved to that new school you know I did have um reliable parents you know cause even when I was re-unified I tried to avoid going home as much as possible I spent pretty much those whole five years going from different families home different families' homes and that's kind of how I grew up.



### 6.5.3 Be A Better Parent/Cherish Biological Relationships

While we do not know how many participants were themselves parents or how many participants had contact with biological family members, a few related their multiple placement move experiences to the value they presently hold for their own families. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- *[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]* It teaches you the right way or wrong way to take care of your kids.
- *[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]* It makes me realize that family is a lot and it is everything...Do the right thing for your own children. ... It just makes me want to be a better Mom...understand my children better and be there for them.
- *[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]* On the other side of the coin, my current bio family is VERY precious to me. The feelings that I have with seeing my brothers and my sisters now is very special to me.





## 7. HOW DO FOSTER CARE ALUMNI DEFINE A PLACEMENT MOVE?

Considerable resources and effort have been expended by foster care researchers, policymakers and agency administrators to decide which placement moves should be counted and which ones should be ignored when reporting on placement moves in foster care. However, little attention has been given to how foster youth or alumni think about or define a placement move. In the months leading up to this project, a search for a definition of placement moves from the perspective of children in care or foster care alumni came up empty. As a result, questions designed to elicit a definition from the perspective of foster care alumni were included in this project. Questions for this section of the interview, summarized in Figure 3, were created with two parts. First, participants were presented with a position statement about how some researchers or agencies define a placement move. Second, the participants were asked to accept or reject the position statement and offer details to explain their responses. The use of position statements in this portion of the interview was necessary because a stand alone open-ended question (e.g., What is a placement move?) alone was insufficient to draw definitive responses. Without the understanding that other people have many definitions for a placement move, the question of “what is a placement move” is nebulous for a person who has lived through multiple moves while in foster care.

*Figure 3*

### *Interview Questions about a Definition*

- If a child lives in a placement for less than one week, then some researchers do not count that placement as a move. How many days should a child stay in a placement for it to count? If you were able to give researchers a definition of a move (or placement change) what would it be?
- Some researchers view moving back and forth between a foster care placement and a birth family as different than moving back and forth between different foster care placements. Do you agree that moving back and forth between a foster care placement and a birth family is different than moving back and forth between different foster care placements?
- Some agencies may not count a move from a foster home to your family and then back to the same foster home as a placement move. Do you agree?

### 7.1 TOWARD A DEFINITION OF A PLACEMENT MOVE

Alumni responses to our questions about how a placement move should be defined generated three key components that seem relevant in order to create a comprehensive definition: (1) shifts in location, (2) shifts in cognition or emotion, and (3) events of moving.

#### 7.1.1 Shifts in Placement Location

The physical shift or change in location, experienced in the placement move, is one key element of the definition. It is important to note that the majority of alumni discounted



the amount of time spent in a particular location. Only three alumni specifically commented that “respite” placement should not count as a move. The majority of alumni voiced strongly that “every move counts”. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** One day, an hour, I don’t understand why it wouldn’t count, what is the prerequisite to make it count or not count? I don’t understand that. It all counts because you are dealing with a human being. Yeah it counts; it doesn’t matter if it is a week or a day or an hour and your dealing with a young human being, so it all counts to me....
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Every move you get your hopes up and you think this the move where I am going to stay.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** If they were there one day and thought this may be my home, or this is where I have to stay, then it should start right then and there...Until you are no longer being moved, wherever you are at is a placement.
- **[28+ moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** Every move counts to me; be it one day or two. A move is a move. Your life changes. You walk home from school wondering if this is going to be the day I move again. There is no certainty.
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** One day. Because it still affects a person one way or another.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Um. It depends. One or two days. If they place you there and then take you out they should count that as a move. A move is a move. Even if you don’t get a chance to know nobody, that still counts as a move. If they move you in two days, it is still a move. You never know how long. Every move should count
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]**..think about how hard it is to pack up all your stuff and move. You have to pack everything and it can be frustrating, like I never really wanted to move either, but they would say pack up and you had to, you know it was frustrating. No one likes to move.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** Ten minutes. Stepping foot into the home.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I think that if a child goes for an hour and if they stay there for an hour that move that change or that placement can affect them within that hour. Cause within that placement if that foster family says something mean or abusive towards them that could change the outlook on life or how they act or their behavior. So you know as soon as they walk in and get introduced and then the first thing that is said that should be when the placement starts.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Every move is a move. You are trying to adjust right away, meeting new people. Every move is a move. ... The FBI would count it. One you relocate it is a move. Back and forth. It is a move.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Well if you are sleeping in a house for more than a couple nights, it is a move. Kids don’t understand the difference between living there and not. Especially young children. They don’t know the difference between a week and a month. Even when respite care turns into a week it is still a placement change. Call it what you want it is a placement change.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** If you move, you move. It might be easier if they knew the same foster family again, but it is still a move.



- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I think that if a child is in a placement for five minutes it should count because you're still dealing with shock. You know it's still a shock.... You are still talking about breaking attachments and new adjustments being made. ... I think foster kids naturally when they are moved in there there's that period of not trust and that period of being little shits you know and that happened for me you know and that's just the way kids are you know you're being thrown in a situation your not going to whole-heartedly embrace something that's a shock ...so, you know you're going to be bracing yourself....
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Every move should count. It is still a move. You are leaving your family that you probably are used to. Even if it was for a little while, you move with a family and then you move back, even if it was a short stay. You move in with your family or a foster home it should still be considered a move. I think it should.

### 7.1.2 Shifts in Cognition or Emotion

Separate from the idea of a physical move—from one location to another—alumni also talked about the cognitive and emotional shifts they experienced in relation to the transition process. It seems that this psychological process may occur along with, or independent from, a physical shift and so is considered a second aspect of the definition of a move. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** Any experience any environment, any word, any gesture, anything that is done from one human being to another counts, especially if it is a young person. ... All of it ultimately makes an impact on the youth. So since it makes an impact it counts, because I guarantee you one thing that it counts to that young person.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** But if they already moved out of the home that they were in, then their emotions are still there, and it still feels like a move. Even with my 2 week stay, I was upset. It was supposed to be a 2 week trial that turned into 3 weeks. I moved all my things there and it felt it was my home. Emotions are still there even in one day. An exception is when the worker says that it is temporary then you don't get your hopes up.
- **[28+ moves with "many" returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** If you... know that that is your home and that is where you will sleep and try to adapt to the best you can.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic]** If you get moved from a place you like and move to a worse place then that is traumatic. It makes a difference the kind of move. When it is definite. Hopefully there is no chance of having to return there.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** ... once the information has been conveyed, the psychological process begins. The wariness, self talk, and protectionist behavior comes in place. ... you already have the adaptive mechanisms in place. Protectionist strategies. You have already prepared yourself for the experience. If [the placement] ends quickly it doesn't matter.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** I'd have to say that it would be a placement with the expectation that I was going to be there a while. That was really hard for me, not knowing how long I was going to be somewhere. Back then the social workers were not forthcoming with information. They didn't expect you to



understand things. Um... I think it depends on the child. For me if I was told it was going to be temporary then I did not feel that was a place I was going to stay. It was not too hard to move from there. I didn't allow myself to get too comfortable, or expect to stay there too long.

- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** Anytime that [foster children] are in a surrounding and they have to make an adjustment then that should be a move.
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Um... an environment where you were in, like somebody's house you were in where you feel comfortable, not just a place you stayed for a week, but when you know them, the foster home and like that.

### 7.1.3 Event Markers of Moving

A third aspect of the definition of a placement move from the perspective of alumni is the concrete markers that signal a move is going to take place. A major marker of a move was the activity of packing ones personal belongings.

#### 7.1.3.1 Packing Personal Belongings

The most common marker was when individuals found themselves packing up their things. It seems essential to point out that many alumni who talked about packing up "their belongings" were referring to the idea of moving *all* of their possessions. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** If all of my stuff went with me I was moving. Otherwise I was just visiting.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Anytime you have to pack up your stuff it still affects you. Sometimes you feel more comfortable with family or sometimes with a foster parent...it is still a move.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Honestly, if you move a child and you move all their things then it counts. Because it says to that child, this is your new room. This is where you are going to stay.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** packing up everything and moving again. A move is a move when you take all your belongings that you can carry, if in a hurry or not, and you know once you leave you are never coming back.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** You have to pack a bag and you are told you are going and you are going. Usually you don't take much of anything with you but a bag of clothes. It happened really quickly. It's hard to remember.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** If you move all your stuff it is a move. If you don't move your stuff [in one or two day placement] then it is just a respite place.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Once a kid packs its bags it is a move.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Anytime when you and your stuff move from one place to another, for more than a few days, it is a move.
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I think that every time you need to pack the children's belongings up and leave, that is a move.



- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Having to pack their things up, toys clothes, moving all of their things into a new family. It is a move.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Packing your stuff and moving.

### **7.1.3.1 Other Markers of Moving**

A few alumni referred to other events that signaled or marked the event of a move. Overall, alumni did not recall experiencing planned interventions such as pre-placement visits or participating in meetings to plan the move. We are inclined to think that interventions to facilitate a successful transition rarely took place for this group of alumni, but recognize that it is possible that such events took place and were not remembered during the time of the interview. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** Moving from one place to another like an institution or one family to another. I'm not talking about when a child moves with the family but the child goes alone.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I guess when you first walk in and say hi, I would say that's when the placement starts. When the placement ends would be when [the foster child] is taken by the caseworker a substitute caseworker or a case aid the foster parent from one foster home to another taken by their biological original adopted parents or anything like that out of the foster home.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Going to meet the other person you are going to stay with.
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I mean I would expand it more like I know right now the current definition is it has to be formally documented you know for it to be counted as a placement, but there are some... many kids that end up with a you know grandparent or fictive you know a parent will put them there even before a removal happens and I think those should count too. I think it needs to be anytime a child is for any length of time being cared for by anyone other than a biological parent that placement should be identified as a placement.

## **7.2 RETURN HOME**

An interesting finding of this study was that some alumni viewed their return home to family as another placement in their journeys through care. Others acknowledged that a return home, whether it was viewed as a placement or not, was a different type of move experience, due to the different emotions and expectations related to the anticipation of living with their birth family.



## 7.2.1 Return Home is the Same as a Placement

For some alumni, moving in and out of ones birth family was viewed as the same as moving through other foster care placements. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** it's all the same and I say that because if the birth family just cast you aside then they become just like the people of a foster family. There is no attachment there. Any move counts it doesn't matter if they move from their mom to their dad to some foster home, to a residential.... there is no difference once the birth family makes the decision to say I don't want you anymore for whatever reason I don't think there is a difference. There wasn't a difference with me.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** When you are moved out of your home and you move back everyone is watching you. Your family becomes your placement. When you are put back it is temporary, you have to go to meetings...until you are no longer a part of the court it is a placement because you can be moved at any time.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** I left the foster-home for my original family and was returned to the same foster home. If it was another foster home it would count. It should be the same.
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** No difference.[no further explanation provided]
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic]** Moving to family. It should count as a move.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** If you are moving you are still moving back and forth, if your birth family can't take care of you it still counts as a move. It is like bouncing from foster home to foster home.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** It depends on the expectations the social worker sets with the kids. If you are going home for visit, it is a visit. If you going home for good, (and then you don't) it feels like you are just going from one foster home to another. It depends on the social worker and the information (they give you). You may believe that you are going to go there to live for good, like in my case with relatives... Then I got pulled out again and felt like I was going from one place to another.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** It's hard for me to speak on this because I didn't have family...well, I didn't discover them until I was an adult. I think from talking to other foster siblings that did have family...it was just as traumatic to move with uncles/aunts that didn't want them or took them in for the money or for some sense of obligation. Unless it was a family member that they[foster siblings] had an established relationship it was just as traumatic.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** ... the child is still moving even if they are moving back with their birth family...even if they are lucky enough to move back to their birth family and then moving back to the same foster home their still making a move.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I think it is equally traumatic.
- **[28+ moves with "many" returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** Blood is stronger than water for some. ...If I had to move back with my Grandmother, things would have been better in terms of providing the basics consistently and exposing me to the extracurricular activities normal kids have. But moving back with my mother



was like moving in with Hitler and I was a Jew in 1943, always very quickly and unsafe.

- [**6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian**] I think they different, yes, but I think they both pose problems you know transition...it was just as hard regardless if it was being re-unified or being in a foster placement and I think that people need to be sensitive to that...

## **7.2.2 Return Home is Different from Placement**

For other alumni, moves to return home were thought of as an experience that was different than moving to other types of foster care placements. The two primary distinguishing features were that a return home involved either different emotions or different expectations.

### **7.2.1.1 Different Emotions**

Several alumni explained that returning home was a different kind of placement move because being reunited with family involved different emotions than moving in with strangers. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- [**5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian**] Um... It kinda is different but it is still hard moving back and forth. It would still be hard moving from place to place with different family members, except with foster homes you would be going to strangers instead of family. But you are still moving. I am kind in the middle on that one.
- [**9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian**] There are emotions about your birth family. If you move back to the same home, then all the emotions are still there..... If you think you are going home there are emotions there from when you grew up. There are no emotions[at a new foster home].
- [**5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American**] Yes, I knew my birth family but not the foster family.... It was bad but I knew what to expect ...
- [**4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic**] Yes. I think it can be damaging to a child to be going from their home base to foster care. That kind of move could be traumatic if done over and over again.
- [**6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American**] The established relationship is the difference. What is familiar. It would be easier to move if the location was familiar...you didn't have to change schools. Those types of factors...they could keep their same established relationships.
- [**3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian**] The only difference is that I could see is that they're moving back with people they supposedly already know how they will react...
- [**3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian**] The children know the family. If they know the family that makes it different. If they know the family they would feel more comfortable than being a stranger.
- [**6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian**] Well they're different because a child being re-unified has an idea of who they are going to be living with because they know them. It's their family. So, I think psychologically it's different.



### 7.2.1.2 *Different Expectations*

Several alumni explained that returning home was a different kind of placement move because being reunited with family involved different expectations than moving in with strangers. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** You are going to ask yourself...Why are you going back now versus some other time. What about my[birth family] situation was different? Even foster parents will ask that.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** I see it like you know...that a move from foster home to home you are glad, excited, can't wait to see your family, friends. ...a move to the next foster home...you feel like you are being shuffled around. It is not a good feeling. I would rather go home so that I don't have to go back to foster care.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** when you feel like you are going home you think you are going home for good. But when get pulled back into foster care you feel like your moving from foster home to another.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Compared to a totally new situation because with moving back to the foster home I mean moving back to the birth home or the original home, adoptive home however you want to describe it, it is that those parents supposedly went through counseling or some other thing and passed whatever program that was. Which would hopefully changed the parent—birth, adoptive, whatever— but you can never know for sure. Or might mask, and then later come back. So you can't tell for sure if it'll do anything.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** You are asking a child to get anchored. They have hopes of going back to the family and they end up moving again. That is traumatic for a child
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I think it would be MORE traumatic for the child to be taken away repeatedly from the biological parent! I have seen kids go back to their parents and you wonder if they should have been sent back, and a month later they are back in care, and then a month later they are back with bio parents again! ...different but I would still consider it a move.





## 8. WHAT ADVICE DO FOSTER CARE ALUMNI HAVE TO OFFER— FOSTER CHILDREN, FOSTER PARENTS AND CASEWORKERS— ABOUT HOW BEST TO HANDLE A PLACEMENT MOVE?

Foster alumni have a unique perspective on placement moves from having lived through the experience. We specifically asked alumni to advise us about what foster children, foster parents and caseworkers—three different players in the move experience—could each do to “best handle” or facilitate successful move transitions. While the majority of “advice” offered by alumni was targeted at foster parents and caseworkers, there was also a message of caution. Specifically, alumni expressed some hesitation in offering advice about what to do. So, we present their advice by starting with a cautionary note.

### 8.1 CAUTIONS ABOUT ADVICE

When asked what advice they had to offer foster children, foster parents or caseworkers involved in placement moves today, alumni qualified their responses with two key points of caution. First, alumni were careful to communicate that no matter what action is taken in a placement move, the “best” way to handle it involves giving consideration to the particular child and to the unique circumstances of the move. The second caution stemmed from the understanding that alumni remembered placement moves as mostly upsetting experiences. Our foster care experts suggested that these notes of caution should be given priority when interpreting the results from this section. The conclusions we drew from alumni participants and our expert reviewers are to not rush to a solution but rather to first acknowledge placement moves as the complex and difficult problem they are, and to understand the needs of children whose lives are affected by it. More specifically, the two cautionary notes offered by alumni were: the best course of action depends on each child and to acknowledge that sometimes it is necessary to pause—“do nothing”—and reflect on how a foster child is experiencing the transition of a particular move before action is taken. Such reflection may lead to actions that best approximate the needs of the child, as well as the needs of others involved in the move.

#### *Interview Questions about Advice*

- What advice would you offer FOSTER CHILDREN in care today about how to best handle a move from one placement to another? How to handle leaving a placement? How to handle going to a new placement?
- What advice would you offer FOSTER PARENTS today about how to best handle a move from one placement to another? How to handle leaving a placement? How to handle going to a new placement?
- What advice would you offer CASE WORKERS today about how to best handle a move from one placement to another? How to handle leaving a placement? How to handle going to a new placement?

#### 8.1.1. A Placement Move Should Consider the Unique Circumstances of Each Child

Alumni were careful to point out that any action or intervention taken during the process of a move transition should be dependent on the unique needs of each child and the particular circumstances around the move. In short, alumni told us that there is no one best way to handle all moves. Any intervention related to moving or transitioning a child



from one placement to another “depends” upon many things. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- [13+ *moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American*] again it depends on, why they have to leave, are they leaving on bad terms, are they leaving on good terms. It is open-ended. It is not specific enough. Dealing with people becomes like a process.
- [7 *moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian*] ...more strict or less strict, it depends on the child and their background and what they are like.
- [20+ *moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian*] Don't know. It is a conditional question. It requires a conditional answer. Each child is different and has different needs, perceptions, and different histories. There is a different quality of fit.
- [6 *moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American*] With some kids you have to be patient, and with others you have to not be so patient. It depends on the kid....with younger kids you have to try to set their minds at ease, with the older ones the best thing is to be straight on.... Everyone's situation is different, so it is hard to offer up ideas, each situation and set of circumstances is different.
- [3 *moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] That I'd say would have to depend on what type of move it is... foster home to foster home within the same school district I'd say the best thing to look at is you're still in the same school or you still have all those main support systems in place. On the foster care to the biological adoptive or whatever parents I'd say your hopefully going back into a better place at least approved by the state, but that doesn't always mean anything. So still keep your eyes peeled. From the foster care to the group or residential I'd say you should look at your behavior cause you might have done something that made that placement or made that move because even though it is a group home it might still be pretty emotional or behavioral problems such as the residential program is.
- [3 *moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] It really depends on the situation I guess.

### 8.1.2. Pause-“Do Nothing”—and Reflect on the Move Before Taking Action

The questions asking foster alumni about how best to handle a placement move was met with many long pauses and hesitations. Some alumni stated that “there is nothing one can do” to best handle a placement move. We understood such comments to mean that there is “nothing” that foster children, foster parents or caseworkers can do to make an upsetting or troubling experience any less traumatic. Considering that alumni remembered their move experiences as a time of profound loss, it is not surprising that they were somewhat at a “loss” to offer advice on what to do. However, we did not interpret these responses to be ones of learned helplessness, which occurs when individuals repeatedly experience aversive events to the point where they eventually take no action to escape or avert such events. Indeed, alumni offered many suggestions about how to best handle placement moves.

The idea behind the message of there is “nothing one can do” seems to be one of acknowledging the placement move experience for what it is—a difficult and traumatic experience. To ask alumni how one should best handle a placement move experience perhaps is much like asking a car accident victim how to best handle a car crash. Perhaps the better question to have asked was how does one get through it and stay intact? Our



use of a metaphor to help convey what we understand the message of alumni to be is purposeful in this instance since we find ourselves lacking the words needed to fully describe the sense of powerlessness felt by alumni as they remembered difficult moves from one foster care placement to another. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** Really there is no advice to be offered to foster kids because there is pretty much at a certain point they have heard it all.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** It's kinda hard...cause. I'm trying to think of something that would have helped me. ...I don't know. I know sometimes people try to say things like "it's not the end of the world but to that kid it feels like it is." Sometimes there really isn't anything you can do.
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Truthfully there is nothing that a foster parent can do to help. It is more the mindset of the child. Even if the foster parent makes it easy, it is still up to the child to make it positive or negative. Even if the foster parent is being positive it won't mean anything if the mindset of the foster child is not positive...
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic]** If you are moving back to family then there is not anything [for foster parents] to say cause that is where children want to be. If they are going to another foster home then you don't know what it is going to be like [foster parents can] say "God bless you." The grass is not always greener on the other side.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** Some foster parents shouldn't be foster parents.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** [Foster parents can't say] nothing to make me feel better.... workers, social services, nothing, basically there isn't nothing they can do that I think, nothing, nothing, nothing.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Move only if it is absolutely necessary. I don't know... Oh, boy, personally I would tell [foster children] not to get their hopes up. I am getting teary.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Moves are scary. I don't know what I would say [to foster children]. I moved in the middle of the night. It was my choice so it was different for me than for most kids.
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** ..... I don't know if there is anything you can say [to foster children] that would help.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** It is kinda hard. Some [foster parents] like to be left alone; there is nothing you can do to change that.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** This is a hard question. I don't know....

## 8.2 ADVICE TO FOSTER CHILDREN

Compared to the amount of advice alumni had for foster parents and caseworkers, they had little advice to offer foster children going through a placement move. Three major themes emerged: children should remain hopeful, ask questions and find a mentor.



## 8.2.1 Try to Adjust/Make the Best of It

Surprisingly, the main message alumni had for foster children was one of staying hopeful and trying your best to make the most out of a bad situation. This theme was remarkable in light of the finding that alumni's memories of their own placement moves were traumatic and filled with significant loss. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I don't talk about moves. I try to boost their self-esteem. I am more interested in self esteem.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** I'd tell them to give the new foster parent a chance.
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Um, you may be there just for a short while, but either way make the best of it. And to try your hardest to just do your best, I guess. ... Try to make the best of things and try to fit in and try to do good. Be respectful and all that stuff....
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Oh my. Gosh... you just have to go with it. Some day it will stop. Even though someone else is moving you, you have to take charge. It is your life. Remember it is your choice how you end up. My sister is a mess. I fought. I chose to forgive and forget. It sucked but I made it through it. Realize that it will end. It will stop.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** Try your best to get along with everybody and be helpful.
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Don't look at it as negative thing, but um... look at it as an experience and learning opportunity. Don't be upset and don't let[moving out] affect your trusting people. Go[into a new placement] with an open mind and not the burden of[past] foster home experiences and stuff.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic]** Teach them to try to look at it in a positive way. I think they should try to leave all animosity behind.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** ...I don't know. This is hard. Hang in there, I guess...hopefully things will get better....not every foster home I was in was a great experience ..try to feel welcome...if you are not welcome try to keep an open mind.
- **[9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Just try to adapt to the situation you are in because you are the one who can adapt and life will get better in the future if you believe in yourself. Don't have a chip on your shoulder and pity yourself.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** I suggest not to go there with a negative attitude. ... Some foster parents aren't out there to get you. Don't think about negative, but think positive and how they can change their own life.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** Best thing I could say for them would be, be open to new ideas. Make the best of what you've got where you are.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** What would I tell a foster care youth....pause...unfortunately I don't have any great words of wisdom but to try to go in with a positive attitude as possible even though it might be hurtful or scary...try to find something positive about the experience is all that I can say.



## 8.2.2 Be Proactive – Ask Questions

Some alumni suggested that foster children should be proactive at engaging adults in conversation or meetings to address their individual concerns or needs. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I think encourage them to ask questions take advantage of their case worker, ask questions take advantage of foster parents and constantly ask you know what's going on with their school, social worker, you know everybody's involved in it you know. I ask a lot of questions and maybe I don't word it the best and it comes out offensively, but I ask a lot of questions about what's going on in everything that I do and um I didn't then....cause I was just a scared little girl, but I wish if I had to go back in that situation I would have pressed the adults that were caring for me to keep me more informed and I guess the kids have to advocate for themselves.
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Try to get as many resources as you can get, like counseling and that other stuff.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** I guess....pause.....its' a tough one. It wasn't a good thing for me back then...try to have conversations with foster parents hopefully they are trying to understand how you feel.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** If something does go wrong to have the caseworker and foster parent in a meeting, and to let them know how you feel.

## 8.2.3 Find a Mentor or Advocate

A few alumni suggested that the best way for foster children to handle a placement move is to connect with a mentor or advocate who could presumably provide some continuity through change of placements. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[28+ moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** Find someone you trust, who believes in you and that is successful in your eyes that you can learn from. Find a mentor that thinks and believes and understands you. Having one person can make you handle all things.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** Try to stay in touch with those you care about as best you can, and don't be afraid to make new friends. You don't forget old friends, but you can never have enough friends.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** If there is something problematic going on...have someone you can talk to about it...a social worker, a teacher, whatever.

## 8.3 ADVICE TO FOSTER PARENTS

Before reviewing specific suggestions that alumni had for foster parents, it is important to keep in mind the two cautionary notes mentioned in section 8.1; that is, foster parents should consider the unique needs of each foster child and acknowledge the difficulty of placement moves when deciding how to best handle a placement move transition. The



four advice themes that emerged included: embrace foster children in a welcoming way, have a transition plan, explain rules and expectations and connect with children's futures after they move out.

### 8.3.1 Embrace Foster Children in your Care

The main point of advice to foster parents had to do with accepting foster children into their homes in a welcoming way. Alumni communicated the idea that it is important for foster parents to view the placement move through the "eyes of the child" and respond to the child's needs, which includes the need to feel wanted by adults who care for them. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Really, they need to convey the message that they are happy that the child is there.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Oh.... I guess to make them feel as comfortable as possible. Talk to them if they need to talk to.
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Um... Be comforting and understanding... Some foster families may have a lot of people move in and out but if they got attached then still let them (foster kid) know you are supportive of them. Be caring. Let them know that you care as much as the other foster homes or maybe even more. ... I would tell the foster kid that the foster placement is there to help them, not be their enemy.
- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** I think it's hard for a foster parent to give the love to a strange child that they would give to their own child. [Don't think]... this child is a file. ...in this child's file there could be all types of horrible things that aren't true...that person who is doing the assessment in my opinion...has half of the information and that half that they have is not enough for them to properly diagnose this child yet now these things will go down in the file.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** If you [foster child] feel excluded, then I'll pull back emotionally and then start pushing them away emotionally. Doing things I shouldn't do like breaking rules to push them away ...sabotage...it wasn't going to work out. ...The home I stayed at for 3 weeks, they had 3 other kids. They would treat their other kids perfectly. When stuff happened I was blamed. I was the bad one. I would say the biggest thing is make the kid coming into your home not to feel excluded. If they have biological kids...don't treat them differently than you treat your own kids.... a big thing is that foster kids feel excluded enough as it is. You are an outcast, excluded at school. So the place they[foster kids] stay should feel comfortable. You want to come home to a place that you feel like people care about you.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** In my experience... Do not prejudge and don't be harsh. They took me in with the thoughts that I was a troubled kid and they had to be hard on me. Don't prejudge, just be accepting. Give them a chance. Many kids are not bad. They may be tough because they have to be, but may not want to be. Most kids in placement have to have tough attitude even though they are scared to death. Other kids in the home can be cruel. You have to act tough.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** Show them unconditional love and patience.
- **[9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Try to help the foster child fit in, treat them like they are one of your own not a ward of the court ... (You could tell



them) you are going to a new home that will take care of you for a while until mom or dad can do that for you. It might be scary but this person will do their best to take care of you and answer any questions that you have.

- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Treat them like they are your own. Never think negatively about a kid. Just talk to them. Talk to them and make them feel welcome. Sit down, and get to know them a bit. Introduce yourself to the kid.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** I feel it actually saved my life. I am sure that I would be in prison or worse if it weren't for the foster parents I had. The foster parents I had were very patient people. That was one of the things that helped me. Beyond that I don't know what to tell them. ...try to make me feel welcome like I was a part of everything. For me being a foster child was a very positive experience.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Make them feel at home. I never felt like it was my home. I always lived in someone else's house. It was never my home. Give the kids their own space, even if they have to share a bedroom, let them have their own space that is theirs.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** Kindness, certain given principles like compassion, empathy, sympathy and those kinds of things. Thing we should do to each other anyhow. In every encounter, be it professional or personal, you have to assess the situation. Basically it is like every day relationships, except the person in care is often in great pain
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** Like I don't know, nothing really .... I got myself in it I will get myself out of it, it was my anger problem not theirs....Um I would say instead of the parents bringing the kid to the [residential facility] I experienced one time the parents brought their kid and all his stuff was in the back of the car and when they got there he wasn't getting out of the car and all kinds of staff members had to come out and get him and restrain him, that is just unnecessary. The placement that they are going to should send out an escort. Like before they sent an escort team with 5 staff to go get the kid and bring them back, that's what I think they should do.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Don't do it for the money. Don't do it unless you really love children. Someday I believe that all the people that messed with us will have to answer to God for all of the crap they did to my family. I would hate to be in their shoes. Mistreating children. There are a lot of them out there.

### 8.3.2 Have a Plan

Alumni suggest that foster parents have a plan for children in their care. The plan should facilitate smooth stays and transitions and could include simple activities such as arranging for a new foster child to connect with other children in the home or community. Not only should the plan be in the child's best interest, but foster parents should also be willing to communicate with the child truthfully about the plan or decisions affecting the child's life. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Coming into the home... my first foster home we went to parties with other kids that were in foster homes, and we got that backpack with the stuffed animal. I still have mine.
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I like that the foster parents have to give notice (if they want a child moved). You should be in it for what's best for



the child. There is almost like a stigma of being a foster parent. People say, “Oh your one of those”. Like we do it for the money. What money?

- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I think that the foster parents and care givers need to have a plan—a transition plan—and they need to keep the child actively involved in that transition plan and you can’t just move with no notice from one place to place even if it is just going home.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** Set goals for them. Prepare them for when they are ready to go out on their own. Try...if the foster parent has gone through what the foster child has gone through...let them know, so they will feel more comfortable. Let them know they are not the only kids who went through that.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** If they are leaving...you know I would think that there should be some type of conference so the child understand why the move is necessary ...even if there is an instance of behavior problems or whatever... a child should never move and not know why...just like what happened to me. I carried that for years...
- **[28+ moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** Make sure that whatever you say is the truth and there is accountability to that truth. So when something goes awry, there is further explanation with why it went differently or wrong.
- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, African American]** ...[Don’t] sweet talk, like “It will be alright and you’ll only be here for a little bit” I don’t like that. Nobody could say anything to help.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** foster care is like secrets kept deep, nobody likes secrets kept. So the best way to avoid most of the problems is don’t keep secrets...share the information.

### 8.3.3 Explain Rules and Expectations

Related to the ideas of welcoming a child and having a plan was the suggestion that foster parents should clearly explain rules and expectations to foster children entering into a new home. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** When they (foster child) move in give them options of what to call them (foster parent). Maybe sit down and explain the rules and the repercussions are if they break the rules, so there are no doubts.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** It can take time. Make sure to tell them who you are, you can call me (Mom, aunt...) show them around, ...where they will stay. This will be their room their bed. Show them where the food is. Make them feel at home. Introduce them to other children in the house.
- **[28+ moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** The foster parent must also make sure the transition is very clear and understood.
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Ask what do they expect from foster home. What would they like to experience. What originally would they want the foster home to turn out like, what they want from them. What both parties are expecting.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** Coming in... people welcoming need to be open-minded to help the child feel at home as much as possible, fit in, talk to you like they would one of their own; ask questions how they can help you. Same when leaving...as a child you want to go somewhere that is friendly.. where



they'll talk to you, say they are "glad to have you." ....Foster parents should do whatever they need to make you feel welcome. They should try to make you feel like you are part of their own household. You are not their own[foster family] but they are there to help you. The foster parents should make you feel that way.

- [*3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] I'd say talk to the child when they first come in and lay down the base rules, but then change them as needed for the kid

### 8.3.4 Connect with Child's Future

Some alumni talked about the role that foster parents can play after children move out. Specifically, that foster parents could stay connected and be a support to foster children even after children have left the home. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- [*4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian*] We like to contact the future home to tell them how we handle specific situations, what worked, what did not work with a specific child. I think foster parents could work together more on that. Meet the child before hand. Having a transition period with the other family then letting the child contact the previous placement after the move.
- [*5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian*] Leaving, if you knew that kid for a while keep in contact with them. Talk to them. You can come pick them up. Hang out.
- [*13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial*]....and let them know that you will be there for them if they really needed you. You know sometimes it's kinda hard when you get out. ...Help them with resources and whatever they need help with. Like different programs, if you need to be enrolled in school or something like that. Trying to make their moving in the best way you can, I guess.
- [*9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian*] Moving from hurt the most. When I moved the first time, they[foster parents] told me that they still wanted to have contact with me. It wasn't personal. ... and even though I am leaving that they will still remember me. That meant a lot to me but at the time, I said I didn't want to have contact. A lot of kids feel like it's their fault when they have to leave. Reassuring them that if they do want to maintain contact. It is so hard to specifically say because not all parents want to maintain contact. They[foster parents] shouldn't say it if they don't mean it because it just gets your hopes up again.
- [*13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American*] the foster family that I consider my family... they tell me I am always their kid. They say that about the kids they take in, that they will always be there for them.
- [*3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] It is important to bring stuff from home to have with them, something to cling on to, that they brought from home... I always thought it was neat that I was able to get a backpack with paper and pencil and you could write down what you were thinking of especially for older kids. I thought that was a great idea.



## 8.4 ADVICE TO CASEWORKERS

Once again, before reviewing specific suggestions that alumni had for caseworkers, it is important to keep in mind the two cautionary notes mentioned in section 8.1; that is, caseworkers should consider the unique needs of each foster child and acknowledge the difficulty of placement moves when deciding how to best handle a placement move transition. Advice themes that emerged for caseworkers included: truthful and dependable communication, be caring and supportive of foster children, arrange activities to facilitate a move transition, and view failed placements as failed relationships.

### 8.4.1 Truthful and Dependable Communication

The most frequently cited piece of advice that alumni had to offer caseworkers was to provide foster children with truthful and dependable information about the move and other decisions affecting their lives. Alumni talked about the importance of honest communication, being able to depend on your caseworker, and counting on your caseworker to believe you about concerns or problems in a particular placement. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** ...the caseworker has to... be honest. Be totally die hard core honest. You know no candy coating no beating around the bush, no going around curves, no making it seem like it's going to be like Willy Wonka and the Chocolate factory, just be honest. You know this is how it is. Tell the child you know this is not you know a place where most kids make it you know most of them say this place is like this or that this or that. You know give them a clue ... if ... the caseworker has some inside information that is not really constructive about this environment that they're taking the child to and they don't let the child know when that child is confronted with that and it brings more problems for that child. I think the caseworker is directly responsible for that, by not being you know honest. So, I think you know honesty is a very strong factor. ...it goes for leaving a placement and going to a placement.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** And they told me your going to be here a month and then you're out of here to residential. When they tell you things like that you want to run away. My foster parent took me out on the porch and told me how it was and I could take it or leave it then and there. She took me to church. She gave me rules and if you couldn't follow them you weren't going out in public. She gave us stipulations. It was good for me. It was good....Caseworker and foster parent should know how the kids feel before they move... and if it really is the place for them or not.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** Caseworker might be in a better position to provide a rationale and information about where the child is going.... Be willing to answer questions openly and honestly.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, African American]** Tell them that they are moving. If there is a way...give them some indication if there are other children in the home, what the parents are like, what they do...just something so that you are not walking in cold.
- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** And if the child knows what the placement is then they can go from that you know, they still have the same support



or the parents are slowly changed or keep a bit of an eye out....allow the foster kids access to the information and to yourself and see them monthly as you're supposed to in person and not over the phone if at all.

- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I would talk with them as early as possible about the people they are going to live with. If they know who they are going to stay with it helps. ...A big majority of caseworkers need some practice on time management. One worker said she had a report to do, I asked if she could get help and she said yes, but she liked to do it herself. They lose track of things and waste time. ...The best advice to Caseworkers is don't lie. I have caught so many in lies! I have a great lie detector and I catch them again and again. They lie to try to keep the placements. There is no need to lie.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** I think it was good that I could still talk with my family. The caseworker should tell them that they can call and see their family. I did not know that. To me caseworkers don't do nothing. They just drop you off and they don't listen. I told my caseworker about something in my foster home that was happening and she thought I was lying. It made me hate her.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American]** My first caseworker wasn't honest with me and we butted heads. My next caseworker told me what it was (that was going on) and it made huge difference in my attitude and everything else.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Caseworkers are not honest with foster parents. They don't tell them the truth about the kids if they are afraid the foster parent wouldn't want the child in their home. They don't do the visits like they are supposed to. They lie, back track, do stuff on paper that they are supposed to do but didn't. They just don't visit the kids. The kids see the therapist and the lawyer more than they see the caseworker. They need to pay attention to the kids.
- **[28+ moves with "many" returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** Not favor the parent, but be objective...
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic]** [My caseworker] was glad that I had requested a new home so that I would not be unhappy in foster care. She was telling me that it was good that I made the request.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** [My caseworker] is on my case...that means she needs to be there to listen to me and not just say that this is the way it is going to be. The kids are going through a terrible transition. They[caseworkers] need to be very understanding and listen to what he or she[foster child] is saying.
- **[9 moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Listen to the concerns and complaints the foster child might have about the foster home. Many times they are telling the truth and may need to be removed.

#### 8.4.2 Be Caring, Understanding and Supportive

In addition to providing truthful and dependable information, alumni advised that caring, understanding and support were key ingredients if caseworkers were to help foster children transition successfully from one placement to another. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** I think they should probably be a little more caring, to the feelings of the foster child, as far as how they feel. Other than just counseling, I think they should care a little more than what they do. And help



out as best as they can as far as resources and all of that. Try to make them feel comfortable and safe wherever they are going. Be as supportive when a child is leaving a placement as when they are going to a new placement.

- **[9+ moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** I don't think it was anything that [my caseworker] told me. It was more the fact that she was there to support me. She would be honest with what she told me. I was told that I would move from my first home at a session with my therapist. When they told me I was going to move, I cried. She [my caseworker] would hug me. I was really lucky to be in a private foster system. My caseworker met me with me once a week ...it meant a lot to me to know that even though my foster parents were changing, that I had her. Every effort should be made to keep the same caseworker.
- **[28+ moves with "many" returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American]** ensure that they support the child by making sure their worries are at the very least acknowledged and making sure they are safe and secure.
- **[8 moves with 0 return home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** They can talk to the foster child and try to ease their worries and help them out. It will be OK. Help personally support the foster child.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Hispanic]** My caseworker told me when I left "I am glad that you are going to go to this other home, with kids your own age, more comfortable, and they will better know how to handle a kid your age...." A caseworker could encourage foster children to behave and to be obedient, courteous... something like that.
- **[9+ moves with 3 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** They need to be more caring. I had some problems in one foster home and I would talk to my caseworker and she was cold to it. Maybe they [caseworker] have never had to go through it [placement]...but they see it and see how it affects kids.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** They did not help much. They could be more positive about it. The most important thing about it is being positive. It was one of the only things you can do. If caseworkers are negative foster children will get negative thoughts. When I got negative comments I got negative thoughts.
- **[20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian]** By in large, caseworkers should do same as foster parents, the basic human kindness we should show one another.

### 8.4.3 Transition Activities

Alumni talked about four different activities that caseworkers could engage in to increase the likelihood of a successful move transition: arrange transition visits, arrange for youth mentors, match foster homes and foster children, and involve foster children in decision making. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

#### 8.4.3.1 Arrange Transition Visits

Many alumni remarked that the opportunity to visit a foster home before placement would be helpful to children. The emphasis of a pre-placement visit has more to do with foster children having a chance to meet the people who will be caring for and living with them, than the actual location or physical set up of the new placement.



- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** I believe that letting the child meet the people... If they are not real young they should be able to meet their new foster parents to feel comfortable.
- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** I think being able to meet who you are going to move in with and not just one meeting them once. Maybe get to know them a couple of times, I think that sometimes it is necessary to move fast but I think they should at least be able to introduce the child and the adult. I think they should introduce them for a weekend, like before they move in, so they get an understanding of who each other is.
- **[13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American]** I think what would help the transition become easier is just like whatever foster parent gets whatever file or profile on this you, I think this youth should equally get a profile on the person that is receiving them...their home, their background, if they went to school, what they went to school for....give that to the child a couple weeks before. Let them decide or even if there is no decision process...at least give them time to process the environment they are going into opposed to just putting them into the environment and hoping it works.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** To meet the people before you move in to the home. I believe that the kids should be able to spend a weekend there before they move there.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American]** Let them visit ahead of time. .. Let them get to know the family first and do fun things with them...
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I think they should let foster parents talk to each other more instead of having to go through caseworkers. Foster parents should talk directly to one another. I have big issues with caseworkers. They don't pay attention. They move the kids and then disappear.
- **[4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** Sometimes the caseworkers think I have two weeks before I have to find a new placement, I will wait until next week. They could have used that time for the child to meet the new family, so they wouldn't be moving in with strangers.
- **[6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** I think it works out better when there is a transition, a prep time you know. I've seen that happen when you know during when I was re-unified the first time the worker was still involved, but the foster parent was completely out of the picture 100% you know and I think that it would have been better if there could have been um communications both ways or visitations both ways to kind of have an adjustment period. You know and that's just all a part of being more informed is just having a transition period.

#### **8.4.3.2 Match Foster Children and Foster Homes**

Beyond having the opportunity to meet people in the next placement, some alumni also recommended that caseworkers carefully match foster children and foster homes before placement. Recommendations for matching seem to be offered by alumni who experienced a particularly negative placement. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Um... I think they need to actually think about the kids, and their ages, and put them into homes with kids their own ages so that they feel more comfortable.



- **[13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, Biracial]** Try to put kids into foster homes where the kids could better adapt... look at their personalities and not just find anybody and stick them with them. They sometimes just put you in anybody's home.
- **[4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Make sure they have investigated the foster home. Some are in it for the money. They should know their foster home. Eventually they will know the kids they work with, and know the foster home. They can place kids and make a better match. If they knew both parties, and took more time before ...just throwing a kids in placement to see if they have a parent who can deal well with the child, it would be better for both foster parent and foster child.
- **[33+ moves with 0 return home, 60+ years old, Caucasian]** Need to take more time in investigating the foster homes and not just do it just for their books, job, or numbers.

#### **8.4.3.3 Arrange For Foster Youth Mentors**

Some alumni suggested that caseworkers could create opportunities for foster children to meet with, or be mentored by, other children living in care. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** If I went to school like I was supposed to, if I had a chance to work one-on-one I would like to volunteer and work with a foster kid. I think more kids need to hear other foster kids talk about their experiences. It helps.
- **[7 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** They should get all these agencies together, and get all these kids who were in foster care. Those youth panels are good. Or have someone like me who has experience work in residential and talk to these kids. ...A pregnancy home for girls who are pregnant would be good. It is hard for them too.
- **[6 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian]** I do know a lot of kids in care now, and when I talk to them I let them know I have been there. I try to talk to them about them about where they are, at and where they can be.
- **[5 moves with 0 return home, 21 to 22 years old, Caucasian]** If you don't like [a foster home] you should have the option of getting out of there. The caseworker didn't believe me about a foster home where they were hitting the kids. There should be someone there to talk with if anything bad is happening. If there is anything wrong they should have someone to talk to. Counselors... I hated them. A big brother or sister might work better.

#### **8.4.3.4 Involve Foster Kids in Decision Making**

Lastly, a few alumni specifically commented on the need for caseworkers to invite foster children to participate in the decision making processes related to placement moves. The responses of alumni that led to this theme are as follows:

- **[3 moves with 0 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian]** Let the foster care kids go to all the court meetings for them, don't just let them read it. Allow the kids to kind of also make some of their own decisions that affect them in and down the road. And try



to keep them in school until they graduate. It is probably the biggest problem I believe with the impact of graduation—even though this is off topic—kids age out before they can graduate.

- [*4 moves with 0 return home, 37 to 40 years old, Caucasian*] In Virginia they have a team approach. A family whose child was taken away has everyone invited to come to a meeting and is asked what they can do to help the child and family, get groceries, doctor appointments, even the foster parents can be a part of the team if they child is actually put into foster care, the bio parents and the community work together. The biological family don't feel like [caseworkers] are trying to keep or take their child away from them. They also contact everyone around the child's circle to see if there is anyone who can take the child if they have to move them.
- [*6 moves with 2 return home, 26 to 31 years old, Caucasian*] If the kid's not talking to them if their not because they're scared or whatever reason or they're not initiating that conversation [the caseworker] need to initiate it themselves. To talk about you know how much kids say when a caseworker says you know ideally what would you like to see if they or if you ask a kid's opinion my gosh they're going to tell you cause they're kind of like you know they can't believe that you want to them to listen and they may not think that you're going to be like that so their not going to be the first ones to say something.

#### **8.4.4 Treat Failed Placements as Failed Relationships**

A last piece of advice came from the words of one alumnus who viewed placement moves through the lens of interpersonal relationships. We highlight this point as the last quote of record in this report because at the heart of most themes in this report was the idea of relationship—either connection or loss—with other people. The idea that caseworkers—as well as, foster parents and foster children for that matter—process placement moves in terms of how relationships between people are transformed (for better or worse) seems like a useful place to start building solutions to the problems inherent in the foster care placement move experience. The response that led to this theme is as follows:

- [*20+ moves with 0 return home, 43 to 53 years old, Caucasian*] I don't know. I think the first target should be the agency. It is always a sense of loss, uncertainty. Any relationship that breaks down, even a bad marriage, at the core someone always feels that they have failed. Ultimately if you frame placement change in the realm of a relationship failure, then you have to look at it differently. By in large placements are failed relationships of one kind or another.





## 9. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research study are not likely to surprise people who live, work or study the foster care system and the people it serves. While the lessons learned in this report may not have relevance for all adults who have experienced foster care, they can bring greater understanding to the lingering effects of placement moves on foster children and provide some insights into the dynamics for foster children during the process of placement moves. This report sheds light on what alumni remember about placement moves and shows that the impact of placement moves is enduring. Our oldest participants in this study had left foster care approximately 45 years before being interviewed. The time lag for the youngest participant was only 6 months. Yet, the memories and perspectives shared by the eldest of our alumni had much in common with participants who were much younger and had recently aged out of care. Memories and perspectives of placement moves were also similar for participants regardless of gender, race or number of moves.

### 9.1 REMEMBERING MULTIPLE PLACEMENT MOVES

Overall, placement moves were remembered by alumni as traumatic experiences. Alumni remembered moves as an event associated with profound loss in several key areas. Alumni spoke about losing a sense of power over what was happening to them as they recalled getting little or no information about the moves they experienced. Many alumni recalled that their personal possessions were lost or stolen during a move process. When personal belongings were lost, so was an important link to any memories associated with those items. Loss of connections with friends, school and siblings was also highlighted in the interviews. Finally, loss of self-esteem and loss of a sense of normalcy also emerged as prominent themes in the interviews.

In addition to the theme of loss, alumni also remembered their placement moves as a time of disconnecting, shutting down, or being decidedly “reluctant” to engage with the next group of adults to be responsible for their care. The qualitative nature of this research study prevents us from drawing cause and effect conclusions. However, the association of experiencing great losses as a result of placement moves and the decision by individual alumni to disengage as a means of self-protection seems too important to ignore. Shutting down emotionally and disconnecting from others seemed to be a common “solution” to the problem of managing the difficulty of mostly unpredictable move transitions. On the other hand, alumni also shared that the memory of a caring adult—foster parent or caseworker—made a positive difference for them in their journey through foster care placements. It is clear that the relationships formed and lost by alumni were central to how they remembered their placement move experiences.



## 9.2 IMPACT OF MULTIPLE PLACEMENT MOVES

Given that alumni remembered placement moves as being mostly traumatic, filled with loss and a time of disengaging from others, it was not surprising to learn that the impact of these experiences left some emotional scars. The repeated process of breaking connections with people left many alumni with unresolved relationship issues in their present day lives. Many alumni said their capacity to trust other people was seriously compromised. Even when placement moves were regarded as positive events by alumni (e.g., leaving a bad placement), similar cognitive and emotional processes were engaged. “Why does no one want me?” “Where am I going to live next?” “Will they want me?” These were common questions considered by alumni in the move process. Moreover, foster alumni not only carried such questions and doubts of previous placement with them through subsequent moves but such questions and doubts seemed to accumulate over time and placements. In addition or perhaps related to being generally wary of others, alumni also talked about keeping “safe distances” in interpersonal relationships. Some alumni talked about living a transient or loner lifestyle, perhaps an extreme form of safe distancing. Others grappled with long-term mental health or emotional struggles.

The alumni who participated in this study experienced placement moves at different times, for different reasons, and with different people. The caseworkers, caregivers and other adults responsible for the moves varied across participants. Despite these differences, many alumni talked about the negative aspects of placement moves in remarkably similar ways. On the other hand, when alumni were asked to talk about any positives gained from the placement move experience, the responses by alumni were quite varied. Many alumni talked about their individual strengths, while only a few shared the idea that multiple placement moves had benefited them by exposing them to different lifestyles and by providing a frame of reference that had them feeling great appreciation for their own families today.

It may be that common themes in the “positive” lessons learned from multiple placement moves did not emerge because in comparison to the negatives, positive comments were few. On the other hand, it may also be that while foster alumni lived through very similar experiences, their individual capacity to cope was unique. In other words, multiple placement moves may present common problems that require unique solutions tailored to the individual needs of each foster child.

## 9.3 DEFINING PLACEMENT MOVES

The definition of a placement move is important because it delineates what is being discussed or examined. To date, research on placement moves has not considered the perspective of foster children or alumni in creating a definition of a placement move. The findings of this study suggest that there are at least three discrete elements of a placement move that have significance to foster children and youth. First, any shift or change in placement, regardless of length of stay, constitutes a placement move. Second, the cognitive or emotional shift experienced by someone who is about to move, or thinks



they are, is another element of the definition. It seems important to note that these physical and cognitive shifts may be only loosely connected to each other. For example, a foster child may believe that a move is imminent so begins the psychological process of shifting thoughts and emotions but the move does not happen. Or alternatively, a child is initially told she will be placed in respite for a weekend and so does not engage the psychological process of thinking or feeling the goodbyes of her current placement. But, later the child finds that her respite stay has extended into several months or more. The third element of a move definition is the concrete markers that signal the move. For example, when children are required to pack their things or participate in a pre-placement visit. These concrete markers are initial signs that precede shifts at the physical or psychological levels.

Another dimension of defining a placement move has to do with foster children returning home to their biological families, or families of origin. The alumni participating in this study presented two opposing points of view about how a return home should be viewed. Some alumni were of the opinion that a return home should be considered the same as any other type of placement, while others felt that a return home was unique because it involved different emotions and expectations.

#### **9.4 HOW TO BEST HANDLE PLACEMENT MOVES**

Alumni participants were asked too what advice they had to offer foster children, foster parents and caseworkers about how to best handle a placement move. As it turned out, these were difficult questions for many participants. Many alumni explained that there is no “one” best response when a foster child moves from one placement to another. What foster children, foster parents and caseworkers do should *depend* on the unique circumstances of each child. Understanding that alumni view foster children as mostly powerless in the move process, it was not surprising to find that most advice offered was directed at foster parents and caseworkers.

The advice that participants had to offer foster parents and caseworkers did not bring new ideas. For example suggestions included: give accurate information to child, provide child with emotional support, match foster family and child, arrange for transition visits prior to placement, and provide consistent support by caseworker. But, beyond the tasks associated with placement moves, a more important message was voiced about how foster parents and caseworkers can approach foster children when carrying out the tasks. Alumni seemed to recognize that caseworkers and foster parents alone cannot fix all the problems associated with placement moves in the foster care system. Alumni seemed to call for workers and caregivers handling placement moves to acknowledge the difficulty of the situation, and then make every effort to reduce harm. In general, participants seemed to emphasize the need for a compassionate and inclusive response by adults who are involved with children through a placement transition, or some portion of it. Alumni talked about embracing foster children, making them feel welcome and wanted, providing truthful information and being supportive and caring. In sum, alumni were



calling for foster parents and caseworkers to tend to both the physical and emotional shifts that are part of the placement move experience.





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## **APPENDIX A: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study was carried out using a qualitative research approach. As with any research, it is important that standards of procedure be met in order for the results to be judged as credible. In this section of the report we provide details of the study's approach and procedure so that readers may judge the credibility of the findings. Our research method is outlined below using the 12 criteria for evaluating qualitative studies as presented by Skek, Tang and Han (2005).

### **CRITERION 1: PHILOSOPHICAL BASE OF THE STUDY**

There are many approaches to qualitative research and this study was undertaken from a phenomenological perspective. Standpoint theory—which explains that the phenomenon of placement moves can be viewed from many points of view (Swigonski, 1994)—was used to frame our investigation. The study focused on the viewpoint of adults who had lived in multiple foster care placements during their childhoods, also known as foster care alumni. A priority of the study was to hear from alumni in their own words. We wanted to learn about the placement move experience as told by alumni and to the extent it was possible, to separate what we learned in this study from theory or empirical assumptions drawn from existing publications on placement moves.

Standpoint theory was chosen to frame the study approach because it recognizes that knowledge communicated through research is limited by the particular point-of-view represented. Multiple standpoints or points-of-view are necessary for full understanding of any phenomenon, including placement moves in foster care. This study focuses on foster alumni—people who have lived through multiple placements—because to date their perspective and dialogue about placement moves is absent from research. Without the perspective of foster alumni, or foster children for that matter, understanding and ultimately action about placement moves is shaped solely by people who have not experienced the phenomenon. The perspective of foster alumni will only enter the research arena if researchers invite them in to share their understanding and experiences.

### **CRITERION 2: NUMBER AND NATURE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS**

We chose to study foster alumni (those who exited the system) instead of foster children (those currently in the system) because in order to learn about the impact of placement moves it was necessary to study people who were past the experience.

We used networking and snowball sampling approaches to recruit the 22 alumni over a three month period. The networking approach involved two steps. First, we extended a direct invitation to people who were known to us as former foster youth (i.e., personal connections or public figures). Second, we provided the details of our project to people



who were likely to know former foster youth (e.g., agency workers, foster parents, foster care researchers) and asked that the information be passed on to alumni. In addition, we used a snowball sampling approach by asking the alumni we interviewed to refer other eligible candidates to the project.

Our initial aim was to recruit 40 alumni to participate in the study over a three-month period. We ended the data collection phase of the study with only 22 participants because we had reached the end of our 3-month data collection time limit. We did not pursue an extension of the data collection period because the data showed strong signs of saturation; that is, interview replies were showing a great deal of repetition and consistency.

### **CRITERION 3: DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

All alumni consented to participate in the research after having either read a flyer about the purpose and nature of the study or hearing the study details from the interviewing researcher. Fifteen participants took part in the study via telephone interview, four participated in face-to-face interviews and three elected to receive the interview questions by e-mail and then typed their responses on their own. All participants responded to the same set of questions; however, e-mail respondents were not exposed to any interviewer prompts or probes.

Overall, interviews lasted about 40 minutes. Face-to-face interviews generally took longer and some telephone interviews were shorter. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in either a public place (i.e., restaurant) or in a private home familiar to the interviewee. The four face-to-face interviews were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim. Telephone responses were recorded by the interviewer while the interview was underway. Wearing a telephone headset and seated at a computer terminal, the interviewer typed the responses of the interviewee as the interview was conducted. Verbatim transcription was not always possible, but interviewers were instructed to capture word-for-word responses as much as possible. In some instances, the interviewer would seek confirmation or correction of the recording by reading the typed script back to the interviewee. This process of recording often meant multiple typos and various forms of short-hand during the actual recording, which were then corrected or filled in following the completion of the interview.

### **CRITERION 4: BIASES AND PREOCCUPATIONS OF THE RESEARCHERS**

The research team was comprised of three women whose biographical information is described in Appendix B of this report. Given the make up of the research team, we acknowledge two biases that would affect how we perceived alumni's interview responses,, as well as what we communicated in the findings of this report.



The first bias we acknowledge is privilege of two types. *Family Privilege*, which refers to “an invisible package of assets and pathways that provides us with a sense of belonging, safety, unconditional love, and spiritual values” (Seita, 2001, p. 131) is one type of privilege that the researchers enjoy from their own personal family experiences. Similarly, *White Privilege*, a concept introduced by Peggy McIntosh in 1988, may also be a potential source of bias since the three researchers were raised in families that identified primarily with “White” or mainstream culture. Although we took careful steps to limit our biases, we acknowledge that family and white privilege make up part of our collective perspective as a research team.

The second bias we acknowledge has to do with our commitment as social workers to social justice, or the basic idea that all people in a society have the same basic rights, security, opportunities, obligations and social benefits. From this point of view, we may have greater sensitivity to situations of injustice or when people are wronged, particularly by social norms or institutions.

We acknowledge that our biases may have led to overemphasizing some themes in this report and overlooking others.

## **CRITERION 5: STEPS TO GUARD AGAINST BIASES**

We took steps to guard against known biases in three different ways.

### **Guarding Against Bias in Developing the Interview Schedule**

Two strategies were used to guard against creating biased interview questions. First, interview questions were crafted so that alumni were asked about both the positive and negative aspects of their placement move experiences. Second, interview questions were reviewed by a foster care alumnus and then pilot tested with three alumni before the final version was set.

### **Guarding against Bias in Type of Interview**

We checked to see whether bias was present in responses by type of interview (i.e., face-to-face, telephone and survey). After the analysis was completed we counted the number of meaning units from each interview that were entered into the analysis. On average, each alumnus contributed 16 meaning units to the final analysis. The fewest number of meaning units derived from one interview was 10, while the most was 21; both were telephone interviews. Consequently, the type of interview—e-mail, telephone or in person—did not seem to limit how much participants had to say.



## **Guarding Against Bias in Conducting Interviews**

Four strategies were used to guard against bias when conducting interviews. First, the lead researcher developed a 90-minute training in which interviewing techniques and procedures were reviewed and practiced. Four topics were emphasized in the training. First, we discussed our own feelings and perceptions about the interview questions as a means to identifying potential bias. Second, we practiced our interviewing technique giving emphasis to Patton's (1999) concept of emphatic neutrality (i.e., assume a caring and interested stance but remain neutral about responses). The priority was to hear from alumni in their own words. Third, we discussed the priority of participant safety. Specifically, this meant watching for early signs of distress (e.g., hesitation, emotional responses) and how to respond with gentle reminders that it was "OK to skip a question or stop the interview".

Second, after the initial training, we met regularly throughout the data collection period to monitor that proper interviewing protocols were being used. We also reviewed the use of prompts in interviewing. Our purpose for using prompts was to generate more detail or examples.

Third, following each interview, the assigned interviewer recorded a separate note to log their feelings, questions or reactions present at the time of conducting the interview.

Fourth, interviews were carried out by three different people using the same structured interview schedule. This prevented bias that might have come from using only one interviewer.

## **CRITERION 6: MEASURES OF RELIABILITY**

Interrater reliability was assessed for one interview question by having the lead researcher and research assistant independently code all 22 interview responses for the question "How big a deal" was moving from one placement to another when you were living in care?" Each rater looked for stand alone meaning units, which mostly took the form of sentences, but sometimes were conveyed by only a few words or entire paragraphs. First-level categories were then created using a constant comparison technique in which like meaning units were grouped together and new groupings were created each time a new or distinct meaning unit emerged. The products of these independent reviews were similar in that common themes were derived from the interview transcripts. However, the review by the research assistant gave more emphasis to the emotions or feelings conveyed in the interview.

## **CRITERION 7: TRIANGULATION**

Triangulation was used in the analysis process. Following the interrater reliability effort described above, the lead researcher and project coordinator took on the main task of



analysis. Using the same first-level coding steps described above, both analysts independently searched the interview data for any discrete meaning units that emerged from the data, including predominant emotional themes. Triangulation was achieved by having the data analyzed from two separate perspectives. One analyst reviewed and coded the interview data on a question-by-question basis. Specifically, the responses of all 22 alumni were reviewed and coded one interview question at a time, and analysis of each new question began with a different participant. For example, analysis of the first question began with the first interview, while analysis of the second question began with the second interview and so on.

In contrast, the second analyst coded the data on an interview-by-interview basis. In other words, the entire first interview (i.e., all questions) was coded before moving on to the next interview transcript. The two independent analyses were largely congruent, producing similar themes and groupings of meaning units. Some differences emerged in the labels given to themes and these were discussed in light of the data. Second-level coding was accomplished by giving consideration to the summaries of both analysts. Subsequently, a final summary analysis was created. It was comprised of four parts—one for each major research question of the study—along with a visual concept map that not only labeled the major themes of the findings but also illustrated the possible relationships between the emergent themes.

## **CRITERION 8: PEER-CHECKING PROCEDURES**

The final summary analysis was independently reviewed by two foster care alumni who happened to also make their careers in foster care, and so we consider them our foster care experts. One expert was a middle-aged Caucasian male, while the other was a 20-something African-American female. Each was invited to provide us with candid comment and critique of the summary analysis. We asked them to point out any gaps, possible misinterpretations, minimizations, exaggerations, missed insights, and so on. We encouraged them to “not be shy” with their feedback. Our priority concern was that the results of our analysis accurately and meaningfully represent the perspective of all 22 foster care alumni interviewed. Feedback with one of our experts took place during a 2 hour face-to-face meeting. Additionally, that expert joined in on the telephone conference to hear and discuss the feedback by the second expert.

## **CRITERION 9: AUDIT TRAILS**

We have kept records of all iteration of data analysis, as well as interviewer notes and analyst comments. This report serves as an audit item since it reports both the technical procedures of the study and offers the most comprehensive display of themes, along with relevant quotes. This report will be the basis from which other presentations and writings are derived.



## **CRITERION 10: ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE OBSERVED FINDINGS**

The main focus of this study was to learn about the experience of placement moves through foster care and the impact of the moves experiences from retrospective accounts by adults who formerly lived in foster care. For these foster alumni who experienced multiple placement moves, it is difficult to isolate the experience of placement moves from other events related to the foster care system. Through our questions and prompts, we made an effort to keep alumni focused specifically on the time of transitioning from one placement to another.

## **CRITERION 11: NEGATIVE EVIDENCE**

A final step in creating the analysis summaries as described above (Criterion #7) was that, all meaning units and interviews were reviewed with the purpose of looking for negative evidence. Or cases in which responses by a participant contradicted the emergent theme.

## **CRITERION 12: STUDY LIMITATIONS**

The most important limitation of the study is that the findings cannot be generalized to the larger population of foster alumni. In other words, the 22 participants in our study do not “speak for” all foster alumni.





## APPENDIX B. RESEARCHER BIOGRAPHIES

**Yvonne A. Unrau, Ph.D.**, Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Western Michigan University. She is in her early-40s and self-identifies as Caucasian but was born to a mixed race (Dutch and Indonesian) family that immigrated to Canada. Before her academic career, she worked in child welfare as a family preservation worker and a coordinator of a therapeutic foster care program. Before starting her academic career, she was a “foster parent” to a teenage girl for nearly two years through an independent living arrangement after attempts to reopen her child welfare case failed because she had reached the age of 16 years old. Yvonne completed five interviews in the project (2 face-to-face and 3 by telephone).

**Kristin S. Putney**, Project Coordinator and Master of Social Work (MSW) Student, School of Social Work, Western Michigan University. She is in her mid-40s and identifies her race as Caucasian. She is mother of two children and has been a licensed foster parent for the past 5 years. She has primarily fostered infants or teenage mothers (along with their children). Kristin completed interviews for 13 alumni (2 face-to-face and 11 by telephone).

**Alexsis Ruthenbeck**, Research Assistant, BSW and then MSW Student, School of Social Work, Western Michigan University. She is in her mid-20s and self-identifies her race as Asian-American. She was born in Korea but adopted as an infant by her Caucasian family. Alexsis conducted one telephone interview and completed the word-for-word transcriptions for the four audio taped interviews.

