Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care: An international journal of group and family care experience

Volume 22.1

Making sense of family: A story completion study of birth children of foster carers

Bethany Shelton

Abstract

Birth children of foster carers are active participants in the foster family unit, and yet their contributions, outcomes, and potential have been consistently neglected in research and policy. Research suggests that birth children within a fostering family provide significant resources and can be hugely influential in the success of a placement. This study explores, through story completion, how birth children of foster carers make sense of being in a foster family. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted on 34 story completion texts from 17 UK-based birth children of foster carers, aged 8-49 years. Three themes were identified: costs, family identity, and empathy. These themes refine the key markers of birth children's experience identified in existing literature and highlight the strategies employed to make sense of their experience. These findings further the discussion that birth children of foster carers should be more widely recognised for their role in the foster family unit, better supported through it, and more officially involved in the decisions and processes of fostering. Existing research and the current study suggest that doing so may help prevent placement breakdown as well as aiding in the recruitment of potential foster carers.

Keywords

Fostering, foster carers, birth children, care experience, story completion

Corresponding author:

Bethany Shelton, Independent researcher, Glasgow,

Bethany.shelton123@outlook.com

Introduction

Fostering is the main form of care for children being cared for away from home in the UK, with over 70,000 children living with foster families (The Fostering Network, 2023). The narrative on UK foster care has been clear for years: the supply of foster carers is outstripped by demand. The number of children entering the care system is increasing year on year and the number of foster carers is not increasing proportionately, resulting in children being left waiting for homes (Home for Good, 2023). This disparity was exacerbated throughout and in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Following the UK lockdown, the children's charity Barnardo's declared a 'state of emergency' for children in, and waiting to enter, care (Barnardo's, 2020). During the initial national restrictions (implemented on 16th March 2020), Barnardo's received 44% more referrals of children being abused or neglected at home than in the same period in 2019. Meanwhile, people contacting the charity with an interest in fostering fell by 47% (Barnardo's, 2020). The Fostering Network (2021) has called this a retention and recruitment crisis. It is therefore vital that there is recent research supporting and improving the outcomes for all those involved in the lives of children and young people with experience of foster care.

Understanding birth children's experiences may prevent placement breakdown, which could support the retention of current foster carers. Difficulties arising between foster and birth children have been reported as a prevalent factor in foster placement breakdown worldwide (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; Oosterman et al., 2007; Thompson et al., 2014; Tonheim & Iversen, 2018). The likelihood of birth children influencing placement breakdown varies depending on the ages and closeness of the birth children and foster children (Rock et al., 2015). However, since there is little research understanding birth children's experiences prior to the point of placement breakdown there is no possibility of evidence-based support to prevent this outcome.

Better understanding birth children of foster carers' experiences may not only support the retention of current foster carers, it may aid in the recruitment of future foster carers. Research is needed to enable prospective foster carers to

make better informed decisions about how fostering might impact all members of their family.

The majority of existing literature on families who foster focuses on the outcomes for children and young people with care experience. Unsurprisingly, positive family relationships increase the chances of better behavioural outcomes for young people with experience of foster care (Cooley et al., 2015). Positive peer relationships have also been seen to offer benefits with respect to care experienced young people's school engagement, self-esteem, and social skills (Farineau et al., 2013; Farruggia & Germo, 2015; Thompson et al., 2016). Young people in foster care with more close friends were also found to be more resilient (Jones, 2012). The benefits of peer relationships for young people with experience of foster care are clear, however the experiences, challenges and outcomes of these peers remain unreported.

Located as a subset of foster children's peers (in a sibling-like relationship), birth children of foster carers also influence the foster child's psychosocial outcomes (Wojciak et al., 2013). Internationally, siblings and foster siblings were expected by the foster parents to be role models, and they were found to be so, showing care for their biological as well as foster siblings (Nordenfors, 2016; Sutton & Stack, 2013; Thompson et al., 2014; Twigg & Swan, 2007). When taking on a caring role, including babysitting their foster sibling, birth children felt they were on the same team as their parents, working towards the shared goal of caring for the foster child (Sutton & Stack, 2013). These increased responsibilities had a largely positive impact on self-worth and prevented feelings of rivalry between birth and foster children (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019; Watson & Jones, 2002). However, for some birth children, particularly those who were not close to their foster sibling, these responsibilities were 'unwanted' (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019). Some birth children also experienced a sense of displacement with this shift or sharing of a familial role (Mainpin et al., 2016). What remains unknown is whether there is any overarching, theoretical framework which could be useful in anticipating this shift, preparing birth children for it and supporting them through it (cf. Thompson et al., 2014). There is little consistent and systematic

research conducted on birth children of foster carers' experience of fostering as its own distinct entity (Twigg & Swan, 2007).

Despite this research being sparse, there are some internationally recurrent markers of birth children's experiences. Common across countries, including the UK, are themes of changes to family life and placement endings (Fox, 2001; Njøs & Seim, 2019; Sutton & Stack, 2013; Watson & Jones, 2002). International research also evidences that many birth children felt they were unaware of the realities of fostering (Nordenfors, 2016; Pugh, 1996; Raineri et al., 2018; Younes & Harp, 2007) and wished they had been better informed before embarking on a foster placement (Watson & Jones, 2002).

When it comes to placement endings, it is consistent throughout the literature that birth children experience grief when a foster child leaves (Sutton & Stack, 2013). Positive bonds between foster and birth children make the end of a placement more emotionally challenging (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019; Sutton & Stack, 2013). As a means of coping with the loss of a child from their home, some birth children dismiss their own sadness to focus on the positives for the child leaving, such as them going to a new family (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019). Others experienced an emotional ambivalence when a foster child to whom they had not been close or who had problematic behaviour left, 'wanting them to leave yet feeling that they had let them down' (Stoneman & Dallos, 2019, p. 180). Particularly when foster children were moved on earlier than expected, birth children of foster carers often felt excluded from and powerless in the decision-making (Njøs & Seim, 2019), and unprepared for the move (Watson & Jones, 2002). Whilst research is aware of loss being a key aspect of birth children's experience of fostering, little has been done to study this grief and its lasting impact on birth children. Increased knowledge and research-informed support could help birth children adjust to their responsibilities, anticipate the changes in their family, and support them to feel more confidently part of the care giving team with their parent(s). The wider impact of this research is unknown but, as indicated, may help solve the retention and recruitment crisis.

The current study

As an understudied area of interest and as the nature of this topic is subjective, qualitative exploratory methods of enquiry have been employed. This qualitative approach does not seek to remove bias from the data, but to explore the meanings participants give to a subject through the stories they tell, and to understand the data in context (Sutton & Stack, 2013).

The current study makes use of story completion tasks to focus on participants' meaning-making with respect to family. Originating from psychoanalytical practice, story completion presents participants with a brief and ambiguous story beginning (a story stem), from which they continue the story (Braun et al., 2020). Within qualitative psychological and psychosocial research, story completion is considered to reflect something of the writer's 'essential psychological truths', whilst also evidencing their world constructions and 'the meaning-making worlds they operate within' (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995, p. 48). Story completion has been used in a number of research areas, such as subjective wellbeing (Lam & Comay, 2020), sense-making of particular phenomena such as the 2020 pandemic restrictions (Braun et al., 2020), and constructions of gender (Jennings et al., 2019).

Being a traditionally projective technique, story completion enables participants to indirectly deal with a phenomenon. This gives participants creativity, control and ownership of their responses while also facilitating access into participants' psychological and psychosocial worlds, their assumptions, and constructions (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2019). Therefore, this study explores participants' conceptualisations of family using story completion tasks to ask: how do birth children of foster carers make sense of their experience of family?

Method

Research design

Respecting participants as experts of their own experiences, the current project conducts a qualitative, exploratory study into how birth children of foster carers make sense of being part of a foster family. Following the theoretical frameworks used previously within story completion literature (e.g., Clarke & Braun, 2019; Clarke et al., 2019; Frith, 2013; Jennings et al., 2019), this study employs a social constructionist perspective informed by Foucault's (1969) post-structuralism. This understands the individual as being in constant reciprocal relationship with external ideas from other people, the environment, and the existing social structure (Joranger, 2016). With respect to story completion, this enables the exploration of the data as psychological discourse of constructed ideas, such as family, and appreciates the interaction of social factors affecting the sense-making processes of individuals.

The discussion of one's own family is often a sensitive subject, particularly for children who may worry about casting judgement on their parents' choices, including the choice to foster. In light of these concerns, story completion enables participants to reflect indirectly on these concepts and their experiences. Due to persisting COVID-19 restrictions during data collection, this study was designed and conducted remotely. Story completion is well suited to remote working (Braun et al., 2020), further supporting it as being an appropriate choice for this study.

All interactions between the researcher and participants were via email. Each participant was provided with an age-appropriate information and debrief document, which included signposts to further support. Consent (or parental consent and participant assent where appropriate) was collected from each participant. The researcher maintained online correspondence with participants throughout the research process.

In line with Gravett's work (2019), participants were encouraged to spend around 10 minutes on each story stem and to write around 10 lines, but were

free to complete the task in their own time, and could return to it as many times as they wished before submitting to the researcher. Following the examples in Gravett's (2019) study, the two story stems below were written by the researcher:

> I. Alex's parents are foster carers. One day, one of Alex's friends asks Alex what it's like to be part of a foster family.

> II. Robin's parents are foster carers. At school, Robin's class are given a homework task to describe their family. At dinner that evening, Robin asks each family member how they would describe their family.

Being inductive, exploratory and constructionist in nature, thematic analysis (TA) was chosen as the appropriate means of analysis. The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of TA to identify precise and exhaustive latent and manifest themes present throughout the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Glasgow's School of Psychology Ethics Committee.

Participants

In line with guidelines from previous story completion research (cf. Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2019; Gravett, 2019; Lam & Comay, 2020), 17 participants (male *N* = 5, female *N* = 12) were recruited, with a mean age of 19 years (range 8-49 years old, median age 15 years). Participants had an average of five years' experience of being a child in a family who foster (range 1-14 years, median experience five years). Fifteen participants identified themselves as white, white British or British, and two participants identified as white other.

Reflexivity

Aware of her alignment with participants as a birth child of foster carers, the researcher took measures to mitigate the potential for personal bias to influence the study. These measures included taking an inductive approach to data analysis, and checking the codes with an external researcher to ensure they were generated from the data. No integral changes were recommended through this peer-review process.

Analysis and interpretation

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of thematic analysis, three core latent themes were identified: costs, family identity, and empathy.

Figure 1: Thematic analysis map

1. Costs

All participants reflect on some aspects of fostering negatively, perceiving them as costs directly associated with adjusting to the needs of a child in their home. The most overarching and frequently explored narrative presents these costs as worthwhile in order to help someone in need. Throughout the data there is an indication that birth children of foster carers suppress some of their emotions for the sake of appearing cooperative in the goal of fostering.

1.1. Redistribution of family resources

The changes to family life experienced when a foster child joins the family ranged from physical things, such as loss of a bedroom, broken toys, and change of food, to changes in routine and social dynamics within the family. These changes were associated with a loss of something valuable to the birth children, such as privacy, parental attention, and fun things such as holidays and favourite foods:

> The food changes. The foster child can be allergic to some things you really like – like Pizza! (Not many people are allergic to pizza!). So we have to change what we eat. (Joy, ll. 4-6)

> You say farewell to being the focus of attention, give up the idea of being just another family on holiday, and often give up the idea of going abroad for holidays - not for a lack of money, but for a lack of respite carers that means your holidaying is England… again. (Ben, ll. 26-29)

> Alex doesn't like it when the foster children play with his things or break his x-box. (Freya, ll. 6-7)

Many participants expressed a sense of frustration at the loss of these valued resources. For some, this surmounted to a feeling of rivalry:

> I used to feel upset, having to share my parents' attention with foster children. (Tara, ll. 9-10)

Despite this competition, participants do not blame the foster child for the frustration they experience. This indicates emotional maturity in participants, as they recognise that the needs of others may require the reprioritisation of family resources. That being said, some participants did not feel this shift so intensely:

> Since I was quite a bit older than my new sisters, I didn't feel we were in competition with each other I felt more like a fun older brother figure. (Martin, ll. 3-5)

Martin was 15 when his parents started fostering and identifies the age difference between him and the foster children as a mitigating factor preventing that sense of competition.

1.2. Emotional cost of endings

The majority of participants identified a child leaving their home as a prominent marker of the foster family experience. The vast majority of descriptions of placement endings carried a sense of grief at the loss of a sibling:

> I don't think I've done anything harder than saying goodbye to a sibling. (Dale, ll. 2-3)

> In the end the hardest bit is that those children that come into your house become your family, they shape your childhood and star in all your memories, and then one day the social worker brings the news that always comes, they have to leave. (Immy, ll. 29-32)

Even though placement endings are to be anticipated as an inevitable part of fostering, these quotes present a feeling of helplessness. Participants also mentioned factors that influence the emotional intensity of placement endings:

> …it is also very sad when they leave especially when you have been with them a long time so you have a really nice connection with them. (Chloe, ll. 1-3)

> I formed a stronger attachment with them, which meant when they moved on it was quite hard. (Steph, ll. 4-6)

The longer the foster child had lived with the foster family and the closer the children had become the more emotional the endings.

> I can personally say it wasn't the best experience but it was good to have a try. (Gail, ll. 4-5)

Gail's quote is one of many demonstrating an ability to positively resolve negative emotions and experiences. Phil's completed stories show a stronger distinction than most that the foster family was performing a care role and the foster children are the recipients of this care:

> Do I miss the individual children when they leave, not really as they are not part of our family for long and soon we will have someone else to help. (Phil, ll. 30-31)

Similarly to Gail's, Phil's story shows a birth child resolving the experience of placement endings by thinking practically about the function of the foster family. This appears to prevent such intense upset when a child leaves.

1.3. Assessment of values

Many participants' stories present fostering as costly but worthwhile since it is the right thing to do:

> It can be challenging and will put a strain on your family but it is definitely worth it. You really come to care for the children in your family and although it is difficult when they have to leave that never makes you regret taking on that child in the first place and it does get a little easier over time. (Lily, ll. 1-5)

The justification of these costs is found in the purpose of being a foster family:

> You know it's a good thing to be doing, you know you are helping children to grow up in a healthy household that keeps them safe

> and watches out for their best interests. It just often feels like it is at your expense. (Ben, ll. 30-33)

Throughout the data, birth children conclude that providing for a child serves a higher purpose, which overrides any more trivial issues encountered when doing so.

2. Family identity

While participants reflect that family 'changes with each placement' (Lily, l. 6), many demonstrate particular boundaries around their concept of family. These boundaries are often fluid, consistent with the idea that the members of the family change regularly:

> We have a small family and we have our big family. (Phil, ll. 32-33)

There is an underlying sense that family is defined by something beyond biology, and the boundaries of family are inclusive rather than exclusive ones.

2.1. Foster families as providers

Central to participants' descriptions of family were ideas around being caring, loving, and providing homes to those who need them. These attributes are resources that the foster children benefit from when living with the foster family:

> But overall, Alex was happy that he lived in a foster family since it was an opportunity to help those that needed, and provide a safe and loving home to those who hadn't experienced one before. (Eva, ll. 14-17)

> Robin's mum says "I would describe our family as caring, because we take in children who may be having a hard time at home or need some support." (Kelly, ll. 12-13)

Participants often displayed pride in being a foster family, rooted in their sense of purpose:

> It's nice, most of the time. It's nice to know that you've given someone a home and a loving family that they wouldn't have had otherwise. (Tara, ll. 1-3)

This concept of being a loving, caring family, and welcoming to others develops in Martin's story:

> It is important for my sisters to see their birth family but sometimes I just want to say to them "you are much better off with us!" (Martin, ll. 16-18)

This not only shows the birth child's fondness for their foster sisters and an awareness of their needs, but they identify the foster family as the appropriate place for the foster children to have their needs met. This supports other quotes demonstrating a definitive sense of the foster family being well-resourced and therefore qualified and capable in caring for foster children.

2.2. Inclusivity of the family

Participants showed varying levels of distinction between siblings and foster siblings. Frequently, foster siblings were regarded as siblings, again showing a construction of family with permeable boundaries. The most common indication of this inclusivity was dropping the qualifier 'foster' from preceding 'sibling'. Amy's stories consistently refer to the protagonist Alex's foster siblings, as just 'siblings':

> Alex pauses because she is unsure what to say because she doesn't really know what it's like not to be part of a foster family. "Just like any other family I think, except you get siblings in a different way to normal", she says. (Amy, ll. 1-3)

> She explains that she considers all her siblings to be siblings, regardless of whether they are related to her biologically or not. They annoy her just like any siblings and they have fun together just like any siblings. (Amy, ll. 5-8)

Whether a deliberate or subconscious linguistic choice to present the foster siblings in this way, Amy's internal construction of family is clearly inclusive to the extent that whether her siblings were gained through birth or fostering is irrelevant to their relationship.

However, other participants maintained a level of distinction between siblings and foster siblings:

> It's always fun to have someone else to hang out with, too, and my foster sibling just feels like another sister. (Tara, ll. 3-4)

> The foster child might talk about Robin's family and their real family... (Joy, ll. 11-13)

> Robin's Dad said: "I treasure you all and love you equally".'(Steph, l. 17)

Despite this differentiation between the children, they are all viewed to be equal. This being voiced through multiple characters within the family suggests participants perceive there to be an agreement among family members that foster children are in some way different, but are treated the same.

2.3. Fostering is not normal

Many participants experience fostering as a point of difference from what they consider to be 'normal':

> Being part of a foster family means giving up your assumed rights to having a normal family. (Ben, ll. 25-26)

Whilst some perceive a substantial difference between their family lives and the family lives of others, Amy and Immy's stories share the idea that their families are not so different to other people's, but perhaps some aspects are hyper-polarised:

> It's just like being part of any family only lots more fun and lots more difficult, and busy too. (Immy, ll. 1-2)

> Alex reflects that being part of a foster family has ups and downs just like being part of any other family but perhaps with more extreme highs and more extreme lows. (Amy, ll. 14-16)

Many participants demonstrate an acceptance (although, begrudgingly for some) of this displacement from the norm being their new normal:

> Alex describes how every day can be different. Arriving home from a day at school to find that there is an additional child at home. No it's not surprising, it just happens that way in our family and has done for as long as I can remember. (Phil, ll. 1-4)

This shows the extent to which birth children have become accustomed to their different way of living.

3. Empathy

The empathy birth children learn through fostering is displayed not only in relation to the foster child but also other members of the family, understanding that each individual may think differently about fostering. Even some of the youngest participants, Chloe and Kelly, both aged 10, demonstrated this empathetic awareness.

3.1. Awareness of the foster child's needs

Many participants recognised that foster children's behaviour did not always correspond to the feelings they were experiencing. Often, participants appear tolerant of these 'volatile' (Martin, l. 43) behaviours and explicitly associate them with the impact of trauma on the foster child's life:

> She explains that children in foster care have often experienced trauma and this can affect the way they behave even after the trauma has stopped which can sometimes be difficult, emotional, or frustrating to live with. (Amy, ll. 9-12)

> The kids that come to stay with you have experienced various levels of trauma in their life, but one thing is for sure - they have experienced trauma at some point or other and how that plays out affects your everyday. (Ben, ll. 8-11)

Being trauma informed in this way not only explains but often excuses the foster child's behaviour for birth children, and thus participants demonstrate empathy:

> Alex says "Sometimes foster kids are nervous, but it can come across as them being angry, bossy or shouting a lot, this can scare other people…" (Kelly, ll. 1-2)

> My adopted sisters feel at home with us. But don't really know how to surface their true feelings. As a result, no one seems to know what is going on in their heads. (Martin, ll. 39-41)

In Ben's story, he introduces the idea that there is a limit to this empathy, which gets worn down over time:

> Robin recognises yet another foster kid navigating the serious effects of trauma on their life. He feels sorry for them, but equally his "sorry for them" has been applied to so many situations that he is somewhat numb to feeling it genuinely. (Ben, ll. 44-47)

This shows the accumulative emotional impact of fostering and possible empathy fatigue experienced by birth children.

3.2. Understanding that individuals experience fostering differently

Participants were aware that each member of the family and the team around the child (namely social workers) experiences fostering differently:

> But the often overworked social workers tend to stress the parents out. (Dale, ll. 4-5)

When prompted by the second story stem to reflect on what other members of the family think about fostering, some participants present fostering as having a greater negative impact on the lives of Robin's birth siblings than on Robin themself:

> Robin's older brother says it's chaos, you can't even hear yourself think most of the time and as for privacy you can forget it, but we have a good laugh I suppose. (Immy, ll. 35-36)

> Robin's sister explained their family as different and weird, she would often go to her friends' houses and they didn't have children interrupting things. She sometimes felt like she couldn't invite friends over because the foster kids that lived with them could be embarrassing or rude. (Eva, ll. 27-30)

This may directly represent participants' perception that their own birth siblings experience fostering more negatively. Alternatively, participants may be sharing their own negative experiences through the voice of a character further removed from themselves.

> As I was writing this up in my book, I saw how different my view was from everyone in the family. (Gail, ll. 17-18)

Gail presents the idea that birth children of foster carers do not get many opportunities to be heard, which may be an isolating experience.

3.3. Future application of empathy

Many participants reflect on the value of this empathy development and the potential for it to be useful in their future lives:

> I believe that it was a great thing that my parents did and believe that it has had an influence on me for the good. Not only in terms of the skills and preparation for my future life that it developed, but also for the beliefs and attitudes that it developed in me for my outlook on life. (Phil, ll. 50-54)

Often, the future application of empathy was communicated through the voice of a parent explaining the reasons for fostering and its benefits. This may indicate participants' perception that this is a central part of their parents' motivation for fostering and therefore a justification for the personal sacrifices:

> He [Robin's Dad] says, "yes we have an unusual family you guys will hear stories that may not be pleasant however this experience will help you in the future with understanding, knowing how to help and being respectful to those in difficult circumstances". (Hope, ll. 17-20)

Some participants review the experience of fostering as informative for their own family and parenthood:

> Now I look back it was also a bit of practice for my own fatherhood skills but with none of the actual responsibility – I could leave the telling off to mum and dad. (Martin, ll. 6-8)

> All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed being part of a foster family, so much that I am desperate to be a foster carer myself. (Steph, ll. 10-11)

This suggests there's a lasting impact of fostering for birth children. Steph's story shows a potential for fostering recruitment to be cyclical; experiencing her parents foster has established her own desire to become a foster carer.

Discussion

The stories shared provide great insight into how birth children of foster carers across a range of ages (8-49 years) make sense of their experience of being in a foster family. Costs of fostering, family identity, and empathy are identified through a post-structuralist thematic analysis as superordinate themes present in the data. The completed stories presented an overarching positivity towards fostering, as being a good and worthwhile experience, in spite of the negative elements.

Previous literature had found birth children of foster carers to experience changes and disruptions to family life (for example, Stoneman & Dallos, 2019; Sutton & Stack, 2013). Developing this, the current study shows that these UK-based participants not only experience changes to their family life, but that these changes come at a cost to themselves, evidenced in a prioritisation of the foster child's needs above their own. Accepting this shift and behaving cooperatively within the family, despite their own feelings, appears to be a key marker of birth children's perception of their contribution to the foster family. Contrary to previous literature, the current study shows negative experiences occur throughout and beyond a placement, not simply during the adjustment period when a child joins or leaves the household (cf. Kaplan, 1988; Swan, 2002). The long-term outcomes for birth children of foster carers remain unknown.

The enduring sense of loss experienced by birth children is overlooked in extant literature but is prominent in the current study. A distinct instance of this in the data is the daily impact of the foster child's trauma on the lives of the family who foster. In both the data and extant literature, early childhood trauma is associated with demanding behavioural needs (Juffer et al., 2011). However, little research has been conducted into how the trauma of a foster child affects other members of the foster family (cf. Hunsley et al., 2021). This study's exploratory findings demonstrate that family members, namely the birth children of foster carers, are affected by the emotional needs of other members. This aligns with Bowen's (1978) family systems theory which finds families to be complex, emotionally interconnected units. Future research should continue examining the costly nature of fostering for birth children of foster carers, and specifically the impact of foster children's trauma, attachment styles, and related behaviours on the outcomes for birth children.

Birth children's ability to empathise is shown as a protective factor, helping them to cope with the costs of fostering. Participants in this study demonstrate empathy not only towards the needs of the foster child but also the demands of their parents, siblings, and social workers. Consistently, throughout previous literature and the current study, birth children appear proficient at adapting to

the demands of fostering, often demonstrating emotional maturity beyond their years (for example, Kaplan, 1988). This supports Sutton and Stack's (2013) use of attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969) as a theoretical explanation for birth children's ability to empathise and positively resolve the costs of fostering. Their secure attachment and psychological security give birth children the confidence to develop coping strategies which allow for the positive resolution of trauma (Sutton & Stack, 2013). Future research could explore this relationship further, establishing whether an association exists between living in a foster family, having a secure attachment, and a child's capacity for empathy.

In extension of this, birth children's secure attachment may also explain the theme of family identity in the data. Many of the completed stories present family as inclusive and accommodating. Secure attachment to the consistent members of the family (in this data, the mother and father) may enable the boundaries around this reliable core to be permeable. Both the permanent and transient relationships are recognised as legitimate family ones. This presents family through Burnham's (1992) framework of relationships being both-and. Many participants demonstrate flexibility in their concept of family, allowing them to consider themselves as being in both 'a big and a little family' (Phil, l. 32). The foster children living with them are understood as both strangers and siblings; they are both different from the rest of the family and just the same as anyone else. Establishing the identity of those in the family appears to be a priority for the participants in this study. This supports group identity as being one of the important 'tools' employed by birth children to help them adapt to the reality of fostering (Sutton & Stack, 2013). However, the long-term outcomes and therapeutic applications of birth children's constructions of family remain unknown.

While qualitative research does not strive to achieve generalisable findings representative of the population, it does seek to adequately capture the experience of a group of people (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Collier & Mahoney, 1996). For this study, the researcher sought to present the experiences and sense-making processes of UK-based birth children of foster carers. However, it is worth revising this to white birth children from heterosexual two-parent

fostering households. All participants who made reference to parents identified both a mother and a father which, of course, only represents one type of family structure. Additionally, nearly all participants identified themselves as white. Overrepresentation of sections of white societies is a persisting issue in psychological research (Arnett, 2008; Thalmayer et al., 2021), as well as within the foster carer population (see Ofsted, 2021). Whilst this may support the sample being representative of the foster family population, future research should continue striving to recruit participants from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. As highlighted in the rationale for this study, more research into the experiences of birth children of foster carers will enable prospective foster carers to make better informed decisions. Birth children from a diverse range of families who foster must be participants in that research in order to engage all current and prospective foster families.

It is also important to note that 12 of the 17 participants were recruited via a post on a social media group for Christian foster carers. While neither religiosity nor spirituality were found to be latent themes in the data, Ben shared an explicit awareness of the family's spiritual motivations for fostering:

> Robin's Dad says, "Our family is exciting, it's different, it's serving the purpose God called us to as a family." (Ben, ll. 34-35)

Religiosity is associated with more self-reported pro-social and socially responsible behaviour in a number of contexts and higher empathetic behaviour than that of the population at large (Batson et al., 1993; Koenig et al., 2007). Knowing that many participants may come from Christian households and that religiosity is reliably influential on the prioritisation of altruism and pro-social behaviour, it seems reasonable that their religiosity may explain participants' tolerance of the negative aspects of fostering and ability to positively resolve them. Religiosity is a variable within fostering literature that would benefit from further exploration and examination.

Conclusions

Through the themes of costs, family identity, and empathy, this study finds that birth children of foster carers understand the purpose of fostering, are resilient in their role, and reflect positively on the experience of fostering. This supports the idea that birth children of foster carers consider themselves active participants in the foster family unit and should be treated as such (for example, Njøs & Seim, 2019).

Reframing birth children as active members within the foster family makes it appropriate to approach them as part of the fostering team. This should encourage social services to incorporate birth children into the official processes of fostering. Watson and Jones (2002) expound how UK and international legislation provides scope for this to be achieved (see section 22.4 of *Children Act* 1989; United Nations, 1989). Birth children of foster carers often reflect positively on the experience of fostering and are open, even 'desperate' (Steph, ll. 11), to become foster carers themselves. However, the inadequate relationship with social services is often reported as a deterrent (Watson & Jones, 2002). Supporting, training, and respecting birth children in their caring roles may improve both their experience of fostering and their relationship with social work. These improvements may see birth children of foster carers flourish in their role, supporting the retention of families who foster, and prove them to be an untapped recruitment resource that UK foster care desperately needs.

References

Ainsworth, M. D., Blehar, M., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A Psychological study of the strange situation.* Lawrence Erlbaum.

Arnett, J. (2008). The neglected 95%: Why American psychology needs to become less American. *American Psychologist, 63*(7), 602-614. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.63.7.602

Barnardo's. (2020). *Barnardo's declares 'state of emergency' as number of children needing foster care during Coronavirus pandemic rises by 44%*. www.barnardos.org.uk/news/barnardos-declares-state-emergency-number-children-needing-foster-care-during-coronavirus

Batson, C. D., Schoenrade, P. A., & Ventis, W. L. (1993). *Religion and the individual*. Oxford University Press.

Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Jason Aronson.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Volume I: Attachment.* Hargarth.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd. https://app.talis.com/glasgow/player#/modules/5f55ffaa3f2b343bc876562b/resources/5f5607666d79536ec4fbb953#

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Frith, H., Hayfield, N., Malson, H., Moller, N., & Shah-Beckley, I. (2019). Qualitative story completion: Possibilities and potential pitfalls—Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Hannah Frith, Nikki Hayfield, Helen Malson, Naomi Moller and Iduna Shah-Beckley in conversation. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 16*, 136–155.

Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Moller, N. (2020). Pandemic tales: Using story completion to explore sense-making around COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. In H. Kara, & S. Khoo (Eds) *Researching in the age of COVID-19 Vol 3: Creativity and ethics* (1st ed., pp. 39-48). Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv18dvt3x.9

Burnham, J. (1992). Approach, method, technique: Making distinctions and creating connections. *Human Systems, 3*(1), 3-26.

Children Act 1989 s. 22.4 (UK). https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/22

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 12*(3), 297–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2019). How can a heterosexual man remove his body hair and retain his masculinity? Mapping stories of male body hair depilation. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *16*, 96–114.

Clarke, V., Braun, V., Frith, H., & Moller, N. (2019). Editorial introduction to the special issue: Using story completion methods in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 16,* 1–20.

Collier, D., & Mahoney, J. (1996). Insights and pitfalls: Selection bias in qualitative research. *World Politics, 49*(1), 56-91. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25053989

Cooley, M., Wojciak, A. S., Farineau, H., & Mullis, A. (2015). The association between perception of relationship with caregivers and behaviours of youth in foster care: A child and caregiver perspective. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 29*(2), 205–221.

Farineau, H. M., Wojciak, A. S., & McWey, L. M. (2013). You matter to me: Important relationships and self-esteem of adolescents in foster care. *Child and Family Social Work, 18*(2), 129–138. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2011.00808.x

Farruggia, S. P., & Germo, G. R. (2015). Problem behavior among older youth in foster care: Examining gender. *Children and Youth Services Review, 48*, 20–30. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.11.005.

Foucault, M. (1969). What is an author. In M. Foucault, D. F. Bouchard & S. Simon (Eds), *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews* (pp. 113–138). Blackwell.

Fox, W. (2001). *The significance of natural children in foster families.* University of East Norwich.

Frith, H. (2013). Accounting for orgasmic absence: Exploring using the story completion method. *Psychology & Sexuality*, *4*, 310–322. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2012.760172

Gravett, K. (2019). Story completion: Storying as a method of meaning-making and discursive discovery. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *18*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919893155

Home for Good. (2023). *Statistics: National statistics for fostering and adoption*. https://homeforgood.org.uk/statistics

Hunsley, J. L., Ekas, N. V., & Crawley, R. D. (2021). An exploratory study of the impact of adoption on adoptive siblings. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *30*(1), 311–324. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-020-01873-4

Jennings, E., Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019) Breaking gendered boundaries? Exploring constructions of counter-normative body hair practices in Āotearoa/New Zealand using story completion. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 16*(1). 74-95. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1536386

Jones, L. (2012). Measuring resiliency and its predictors in recently discharged foster youth. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal, 29*(6), 515–533. https://doi.org/10. 1007/s10560-012-0275-z.

Joranger, L. (2016). Individual perception and cultural development: Foucault's 1954 approach to mental illness and its history. *History of Psychology, 19*(1), 40-51. https://doi.org/10.1037/hop0000014

Juffer, F., Palacios, J., Le Mare, L., Sonuga-Barke, E. J. S., Tieman, W., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., Vorria, P., van IJzendoorn, M. H., & Verhulst, F. C. (2011). Development of adopted children with histories of early adversity. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, *76*, 31–61.

Kalland, M., & Sinkkonen, J. (2001). Finnish children in foster care: Evaluating the breakdown of long-term placements. *Child Welfare, 80*(5), 513–527.

Kaplan, C. (1988). The biological children of foster parents in the foster family. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 5*(4), 281–299. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00755392

Kitzinger, C., & Powell, D. (1995). Engendering infidelity: Essentialist and social constructionist readings of a story completion task. *Feminism & Psychology*, *5*(3), 345-372. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353595053004

Knutsen, J. M. (2014). The anonymous helpers – self-image of children of foster parents. *Norwegian Child Welfare, 91*(1), 20–30.

Koenig, L. B., McGue, M., Krueger, R. F., & Bouchard, T. J., Jr. (2007). Religiousness, antisocial behavior, and altruism: Genetic and environmental mediation. *Journal of Personality*, *75*, 265–290.

Lam, L., & Comay, J. (2020). Using a story completion task to elicit young children's subjective well-being at school. *Child Indicators Research*, *13*(6), 2225–2239. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09745-5

Mainpin, A. M., Minary, L., & Boutanquoi, M. (2016). Anxiety, depression and fraternal experiences on the birth child in a foster home. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal, 33*(5), 443–454.

Njøs, B. M., & Seim, S. (2019). Biological children as participants in foster families. *Nordic Social Work Research*, *9*(2), 160-171. https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2018.1465843

Nordenfors, M. (2016). Children's participation in foster care placements. *European Journal of Social Work, 19*(6), 856–870. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2015.1084493

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 160940691773384. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Ofsted. (2021). *Fostering in England 2018 to 2019: Main findings*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in-england-1-april-2018-to-31-march-2019/fostering-in-england-2018-to-2019-main-findings

Oosterman, M., Schuengel, C., & Slot, N. W. (2007). Disruptions in foster care: A review and meta-analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*(1), 53–76.

Raineri, M. L., Calcaterra, V., & Folgheraiter, F. (2018). 'We are caregivers, too': Foster siblings' difficulties, strengths, and needs for support. *Child & Family Social Work, 23*(4), 625–632. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12453

Pugh, G. (1996). Seen but not heard. *Adoption and Fostering, 20,* 35-41.

Rock, S., Michelson, D., Thomson, S., & Day, C. (2015). Understanding foster placement instability for looked after children: A systematic review and narrative synthesis of quantitative and qualitative evidence. *British Journal of Social Work, 45*(1), 177–203.

Stoneman, K., & Dallos, R. (2019). 'The love is spread out': How birth children talk about their experiences of living with foster children. *Adoption & Fostering*, *43*(2), 169-191. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0308575919848907

Sutton, L., & Stack, N. (2013) Hearing quiet voices: Biological children's experiences of fostering. *British Journal of Social Work, 43*(3): 596–612. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23722936

Swan, T. (2002). The experiences of foster caregivers' children. *Canada's Children, 3*, 13-17.

Thalmayer, A. G., Toscanelli, C., & Arnett, J. J. (2021). The neglected 95% revisited: Is American psychology becoming less American? *American Psychologist, 76*(1), 116-129. https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000622

The Fostering Network. (2021). *'Don't fail our young people': Carers and services unite for urgent change to fostering system at risk.* https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/media-release/2021/dont-fail-our-young-people-carers-and-services-unite-urgent-change-fostering

The Fostering Network. (2023). *Fostering Statistics.* https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics

Thompson, H., McPherson, S., & Marsland, L. (2014). 'Am I damaging my own family?': Relational changes between foster carers and their birth children.

Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, *21*(1), 48–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104514554310

Thompson, H. M., Wojciak, A. S., & Cooley, M. E. (2016). Self-esteem: A mediator between peer relationships and behaviors of adolescents in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 66*, 109–116. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.05.003

Tonheim, M., & Iversen, A. C. (2018). "We felt completely left to ourselves." Foster parents' views on placement disruption. *Child & Family Social Work*, *24*(1), 90–97. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12585

Twigg, R., & Swan, T. (2007). Inside the foster family: What research tells us about the experience of foster carers' children. *Adoption & Fostering, 31(*4), 49–61.

United Nations. (1989). *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.* https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf?_ga=2.41562981.611372858.1615908551-833818665.1615908551

Watson, A., & Jones, D. (2002). The impact of fostering on foster carers' own children. *Adoption & Fostering, 26*(1), 49–55.

Wojciak, A. S., McWey, L. M., & Helfrich, C. M. (2013). Sibling relationships and internalizing symptoms of youth in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 35*(7), 1071–1077. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.04.021.

Younes, M. N., & Harp, M. (2007). Addressing the impact of foster care on biological children and their families. *Child Welfare, 86*(4), 21–40.

About the author

Bethany Shelton has a decade of personal and professional experience supporting families who foster. Bethany is a birth child of foster carers and has worked at the UK's leading fostering charity, The Fostering Network. This research was conducted as part of her MA Hons in Psychology and Theology, for which she was awarded a first class degree, at the University of Glasgow.

Appendix 1

Full quotes table

Themes and Subthemes	*Supporting Quotes with Participant Pseudonym and line references*
Theme 1: Costs	
Subtheme 1: Redistribution of family resources	The food changes. The foster child can be allergic to some things you really like – like Pizza! (Not many people are allergic to pizza!). So we have to change what we eat. Joy, ll. 4-6 "It does sound awesome, but sometimes it's really hard. I used to feel upset, having to share my parents' attention with foster children…." Tara, ll. 8-10 Alex describes the role of being a foster-sibling as challenging at times since many of them need more attention than him and that can be difficult at times. Eva ll.3-5 The person who stays needs a nice room – so we had to reorganise our stuff in the house for them to move in. Joy, ll. 7-8 Well, a lot of things change. You have to change the times things happen at home – they might not like what you do. So, I like swimming but the foster child might like running and we have to organise when we do our activities. Joy, ll. 1-3 From breakfast to dinner time, mealtimes with even an older foster kid can end up almost as though you have a baby at the table, all the attention is poured over them to try and get them to eat, to eat the right things, to make sure they're not hoarding food away, to ensure they are eating enough. Ben, ll. 11-15 You say farewell to being the focus of attention, give up the idea of being just another family on holiday, and often give up the idea of going abroad for holidays - not for a lack of money, but for a lack of respite carers that means your holidaying is England… again. Ben, ll. 26-29

	Alex describes how every day can be different. Phil l. 1 Alex told his friend about how dinners were always difficult, sometimes the kids would throw food, chew with their mouth open, try to take over the conversation or shout at people at the table. Eva, ll. 9-11 Playing with her sisters can be really fun but she feels a bit of burden looking after them especially since her older brother left home. Martin, ll. 36-38 Yes I am expected to help out, usually its playing with the children whilst mum and dad sort out the rooms or prepare the meals etc. Phil, ll. 14-15 It's quite fun although you do have to help out around the house more. Dale, l. 1 Robin's Dad said that we all work hard to make a child feel secure & part of the family. Lily, ll. 7-8 Since I was quite a bit older than my new sisters, I didn't feel we were in competition with each other I felt more like a fun older brother figure. Martin, ll. 3-5 My birth sister would say that she thinks the family has made the right decision to give these children a home. But deep down she feels a little jealous as they stole her spot as the only daughter and youngest in the family. Martin, ll. 33-35 It's can be hard too that sometimes you need to talk to people about how hard your week has been and all they say is "awk but wee Jonny has had such a hard time", that drives you up the walls cause not only do they not know what the kids have come through they don't understand what it's like to live with that 24/7, with no break, because social services say they can't get respite. Immy, ll. 14-19. Alex doesn't like it when the foster children play with his things or break his x-box. Freya, ll. 6-7 My parents definitely turned their attention to my new sisters more but since I was a teenager at the time it was ideal to get them off my back a bit and have some more independence. Martin, ll. 8-10 You get used to that though, sometimes they get really angry and violent, they kick you, bite you, pull your hair, throw things at you and spit in your face. Some of them tip over tables, cut the bristles off your hair brush and even put squirty soap in your shoes. Immy, ll. 5-8
Subtheme 2: Emotional cost of endings	Alex then proceeds "Its also hard when they leave because if they have been with them for a long time you've probably bonded with them well and they may not stay in touch." Kelly, ll. 6-8 It's exciting because you get to meet loads of different children but it is also very sad when they leave especially when you have been with them a long time so you have a really nice connection with them. Chloe, ll. 1-3 It is often very upsetting when the children leave your home to either go back to family or go to adopters but you have to remind yourself you did the best that you could do and you have helped improve that child's life. Hope, ll. 6-9 I don't think I've done anything harder than saying goodbye to a sibling. Dale, ll. 2-3 You really come to care for the children in your family and although it is difficult when they have to leave that never makes you regret taking on that child in the first place and it does get a little easier over time. Lily, ll. 3-5

	In the end the hardest bit is that those children that come into your house become your family, they shape your childhood and star in all your memories, and then one day the social worker brings the news that always comes, they have to leave. Immy, ll. 29-32 I formed a stronger attachment with them, which meant when they moved on it was quite hard. Steph, ll. 4-6 Those children that are regular coming back to our house we get to know more and it will be difficult when they stop coming. Phil, ll. 38-39 Deep down she worries that her adopted children might go off the rails and decide they don't want anything to do with our family anymore. Martin, ll. 24-26 Do I miss the individual children when they leave, not really as they are not part of our family for long and soon we will have someone else to help. Phil, ll. 30-31
Subtheme 3: Assessment of values	Michelle is Robins Mum. She thinks that they are doing a good thing, that they are really caring. Freya, ll. 9-10 It feels good knowing your family is making a difference. Dale, ll. 3-4 You really come to care for the children in your family and although it is difficult when they have to leave that never makes you regret taking on that child in the first place and it does get a little easier over time. Lily, ll. 3-5 However the majority of the time it is incredibly rewarding as you feel like you and your family has done something to improve the world and watching the foster children improve is very heart warming. Hope, ll. 3-6 It can be challenging and will put a strain on your family but it is definitely worth it. Lily, ll. 1-3 You know it's a good thing to be doing, you know you are helping children to grow up in a healthy household that keeps them safe and watches out for their best interests. It just often feels like it is at your expense. Ben, ll. 30-33 It makes me feel grown up to be able to help in these ways and proud that I am able to help another family who is struggling. Phil, ll. 17-18 But overall, Alex was happy that he lived in a foster family since it was an opportunity to help those that needed, and provide a safe and loving home to those who hadn't experienced one before. Eva, ll. 14-17 He really appreciated that while he knew fostering was difficult in some way for each family member, that they have opened up their house for others. Eva, ll. 22-24 But that's enough about the bad bits, it's the most wonderful thing at the same time. Immy, ll. 20-21 But sometimes, my foster sibling shouts and screams. It makes me upset that she doesn't know that we all love her, and it's quite annoying when she blames me for everything. Still, she's part of our family and I'd never want her to go."
Theme 2: Family Identity	
Subtheme 1: Foster family are providers	Dad feels angry at the world because his adopted children never sees their birth father and therefore takes his fathering duties very seriously. Martin, ll. 29-10 They all said that as a foster family that fostering is something that everyone is involved in decision making and care provision. Lily, ll. 11-12

	Robin's mum says "I would describe our family as caring, because we take in children who may be having a hard time at home or need some support." Kelly, ll. 12-13 Michelle is Robins Mum. She thinks that they are doing a good thing, that they are really caring. Freya, ll. 9-10 Robin's mother says 'we are a loving family, that's how I'd describe us, that's the most important thing. Amy, ll. 22-23 The dad describes the family as: Caring and kind. Chloe, l. 5 Robin's dad says "I think we are considerate, because we look after anyone who needs us." Robin's sister says "I would say that we are loving, because we show that we care about others through fostering children and babies. We also offer a lot of hospitality for the children that need it and for those who don't." Kelly, ll. 15-19 It is important for my sisters to see their birth family but sometimes I just want to say to them "you are much better off with us!" Martin, ll. 16-18 But Alex understands that some kids need a home, so he accepts that they are part of the family. Freya, ll. 7-8 "...We have the amazing opportunity to care for others, and while it is often difficult, it's better than not doing it." Ben, ll. 34-36 My birth sister would say that she thinks the family has made the right decision to give these children a home. Martin, ll. 33-34 It's nice to know that you've given someone a home and a loving family that they wouldn't have had otherwise. Tara, ll. 1-3 Alex goes on to explain that they have different children living with them, that children come to live with them when their parents are not able to look after them anymore. Eva, ll. 1-3 She can get angry at their birth mother for what she sees as not taking her mothering duty seriously. Martin, ll. 21-22 But overall, Alex was happy that he lived in a foster family since it was an opportunity to help those that needed, and provide and safe and loving home to those who hadn't experienced one before. Eva, ll. 14-17 Robins dad says their family is great he just wishes they could help more children and fill the house. Immy, ll. 36-37
Subtheme 2: Inclusivity of the family	Robin's Mum said that our family changes with each placement. Lily, l. 6 Robin's Mum adds, 'Our family changes regularly, sometimes we have a foster kid, sometimes we have two, sometimes we don't have any. It's a constant change. Ben, ll. 37-39 It is just what it says... a family, it just means some of your brothers and sisters come and go quickly while others hang around a bit longer. Immy, ll. 2-4 Mum would say that she feels a deep love and connection for her adopted children as she does her birth children. Martin, ll. 20-21 He also loves the adopted children just as much as his birth children. Martin, l. 28 Robin's Dad said: I treasure you all and love you equally. Steph, l. 17

	They say to me that they love my brother and I in a special way as we are their natural children and they love the other children we have as some of them don't have love at their homes. Phil, ll. 35-38 The foster child might talk about Robin's family and their real family if they felt they could talk about it, or maybe not want to answer. Joy, ll. 11-13 Am I ever frustrated or cross about having other children join our family, sometimes as I don't get to have my own room I have to share this with my 'real' brother and we don't get on so easy as we are always in each other way. Phil, ll. 23-25 Alex told his friends that it can be a range of emotions. Hope, l. 1 We have a small family and we have our big family. The big family are those foster children that come to our house. Phil, ll. 32-33 This showed that even those who were born with a bad beak, have capabilities to sing a wonderful song, they just needed an invite. Ryan, ll. 19-20 But Alex understands that some kids need a home, so he accepts that they are part of the family. Freya, ll. 7-8 But I love my siblings despite and through their struggle because that's what family is. We stick by each other.' Amy, ll. 12-14 They become one of your family, they stick up for you, and dear help anyone that says a bad word about them. Immy, ll. 25-26 You just don't expect it to be any certain way, when you wake up in the morning you just never know who could come and join your family and change your life and theirs forever. Immy, ll. 48-50 "Well I'm not in this family, am I?" she replies. "And none of you love me as much as you love each other. You'll probably get rid of me soon anyway." "That's not true!" shouts Robin. "You're my sister, and we all love you so much! And you are in our family. We never want you to go." The rest of the family agrees. Tara, ll. 27-31 "… The next day at school, Robin writes about her family, including her wonderful older sister who she loves so much." Tara ll. 33-34 Robin's foster sibling: I love having such a caring family to live with. Steph, l. 18 For me becoming a foster family was somewhat unexpected and the prospect of gaining additional younger sisters was really cool. Martin, ll. 1-3 Alex pauses because she is unsure what to say because she doesn't really know what it's like not to be part of a foster family. 'Just like any other family I think, except you get siblings in a different way to normal.' she says. Amy, ll. 1-3 She explains that she considers all her siblings to be siblings, regardless of whether they are related to her biologically or not. They annoy her just like her just like any siblings and they have fun together just like any siblings. Amy, ll. 5-8 Robin describes her family as the best family she could imagine they have an open door policy to help lots of people, there's always plenty of people coming and going and networking with other foster families, her extra brothers and sisters are just as special to her as her own. Immy, ll. 44-48 'Because your part of our flock, even if you have a different colour coat of feathers.' Ryan, ll. 32-33

	I don't think I've done anything harder than saying goodbye to a sibling. Dale, ll. 2-3 Robin's older sister said: crazy but loving. I love having so many brothers and sisters. Steph, ll. 13-14 As for me, I think I like having this bigger family, most of the time. Phil, l. 46 "...It's always fun to have someone else to hang out with, too, and my foster sibling just feels like another sister." Tara, ll. 3-4 Robin's mum said: I love my family, everyone of you, you are all my children. Steph, l. 16 Now as an adult I look back on my childhood times and appreciate the privilege it was to be able to have this extended family, however fleeting it was with some of the foster children. Phil, ll. 48-50 "Well, I'd say that there are five of us in the family: me, your dad, and both your sister." Tara, ll. 17-18
Subtheme 3: Fostering is not normal	Alex reflects that being part of a foster family has ups and downs just like being part of any other family but perhaps with more extreme highs and more extreme lows. Amy, ll. 14-16 They end up agreeing with Mum that we do spend lots of time together, much more than their friends families do, 'which is sometimes nice' they exclaim with a cheeky grin. Amy, ll. 29-30 It's just like being part of any family only lots more fun and lots more difficult, and busy too. Immy, ll. 1-2 Robin's younger sister says she like their family it's a bit different to her friends and sometime she doesn't want to ask people round incase it all kicks off Immy, ll. 37-39 Alex pauses because she is unsure what to say because she doesn't really know what it's like not to be part of a foster family. Amy, ll. 1-2 Robin notes that the description of family is based all around fostering. While he's proud of it, the persistency of it is tiring and wearing thin. Ben, ll. 40-41 Alex describes how every day can be different. Arriving home from a day at school to find that there is an additional child at home. No its not surprising, it just happens that way in our family and has done for as long as I can remember. Phil, ll. 1-4 When we have had foster kids we have done things that we wouldn't usually do. Kelly, ll. 10-11 'There are so many fun bits that just wouldn't happen if we weren't a foster family, but there's also difficult stuff that probably wouldn't be there either.' Amy, ll. 16-18 Well, a lot of things change. Joy, l. 1 Being part of a foster family means giving up your assumed rights to having a normal family. Ben, ll. 25-26 Robin's Dad says, 'Our family is exciting, it's different, it's serving the purpose God called us to as a family. Ben, ll. 34-35 She can remember the first day she realised she was different. Her white hands holding the hands of her black mother, sure that something was wrong but not sure if it could be right any other way. Ryan, ll. 22-25
Theme 2: Empathy	

Subtheme 1: Awareness of the foster child's needs	Robin's family is fostering two year old triplets. They can't speak properly and they have disabilities. Freya, ll. 17-18 I know now that it's a lot harder for them, and that they just need more attention and love; they never had it before. Tara, ll. 10-12 Alex says, "Sometimes foster kids are nervous, but it can come across as them being angry, bossy or shouting a lot, this can scare other people. Foster kids also find it hard to adapt to new surroundings and say if they are uncomfortable or miss something from their old home." Kelly, ll. 1-4 My adopted sisters feel at home with us. But don't really know how to surface their true feelings. As a result, no one seems to know what is going on in their heads. Knowing that they are going to see their birth mum soon can bring back a lot of mixed emotions that can make them feel a bit emotionally volatile Martin, ll. 39-43 he explains that children in foster care have often experienced trauma and this can affect they way they behave even after the trauma has stopped which can sometimes be difficult, emotional, or frustrating to live with. Amy, ll. 9-12 They often find it difficult to engage in conversations like this that require contemplating and articulating emotions. Amy, ll. 26-28 Alex says 'It is often quite hard because the foster child doesn't know how to express his emotions in the same way we do. Often their family has gone through hard times. Gail, ll. 1-3 Being part of a foster family can be quite destabilising. The kids that come to stay with you have experienced various levels of trauma in their life, but one thing is for sure - they have experienced trauma at some point or other and how that plays out affects your everyday. Ben, ll. 8-11 The foster kid strikes up, 'I don't have a family. I just move from house to house. I hate families, I hate Mums, I hate Dads, I never want a family again.' Robin recognises yet another foster kid navigating the serious effects of trauma on their life. He feels sorry for them, but equally his 'sorry for them' has been applied to so many situations that he is somewhat numb to feeling it genuinely. Ben, ll. 42-47 Sometimes the foster kids have come from backgrounds of trauma and neglect so they can have meltdowns, or be aggressive towards your parents and that can be difficult to watch or deal with. Eva, ll. 12-14
Subtheme 2: Understanding other individuals experience fostering differently	As I was writing this up in my book, I saw how different my view was from everyone in the family. Gail, ll. 17-18 Max thinks that the family is completely chaotic, so most of the time he does stay in his room. Freya, ll. 13-14 The brother would probably say 'Different, but that's OK' Gail, l. 12 Robin's older brother says it's chaos, you can't even hear yourself think most of the time and as for privacy you can forget it, but we have a good laugh I suppose. Immy, ll. 34-36

	Robin's younger sister says she like their family it's a bit different to her friends and sometime she doesn't want to ask people round incase it all kicks off, she says she doesn't like that her mum and dad are so busy with talking to social workers and all those other people and she hates when they fight because of the foster children but she likes that there's always someone to play with. Immy, ll. 37-42 My brother I think finds it difficult sometimes to have other children in the family. He doesn't like it when the foster children arrive as he thinks that mum and Dad don't spend time with him. I am not sure if he thinks the foster children are part of our family or not. Phil, ll. 42-45 Robin's sister explained their family as different and weird, she would often go to her friends houses and they didn't have children interrupting things. She sometimes felt like she couldn't invite friends over because the foster kids that lived with them could be embarrassing or rude. Eva, ll. 27-30 But the often overworked social workers tend to stress the parents out. Dale, ll. 4-5 My birth sister would say that she thinks the family has made the right decision to give these children a home. But deep down she feels a little jealous as they stole her spot as the only daughter and youngest in the family. Martin, ll. 33-35
Subtheme 3: Future application of empathy	Now I look back it was also a bit of practice for my own fatherhood skills but with none of the actual responsibility – I could leave the telling off to mum and dad. Martin, ll. 6-8 He says, yes we have an unusual family you guys will hear stories that may not be pleasant however this experience will help you in the future with understanding, knowing how to help and being respectful to those in difficult circumstances. Hope, ll. 17-20 I believe that it was a great thing that my parents did and believe that it has had an influence on me for the good. Not only in terms of the skills and preparation for my future life that it developed, but also for the beliefs and attitudes that it developed in me for my outlook on life. Overall I believe that I gained a great benefit from the care my parents showed to the families they were able to help. Phil, ll. 50-55 Together they all agree that we have a an unusual family however fostering has really helped us come together as a family and helped us become better people. Hope, ll. 25-27 He explains that it was more difficult when he was younger as he didn't really understand why these children were coming to live in his house and getting lots of new toys but now he's older and understands background to these children, it's opened up his perspective to how some people live outside of his house. Eva, ll. 5-9 All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed being part of a foster family, so much that I am desperate to be a foster carer myself. Steph, ll. 10-11