

Developmental research for social foster care and parental support

Professor Keiji Noguchi at Fukuyama City University, in the Faculty of Education, presents a practical model for social foster care in Japan

Japanese child welfare services serve over 42,000 children in social foster care. Almost 80% of these children receive these services at care facilities, and foster parent placement rates are comparatively lower than in other countries. The international community viewed this as a problem after Japan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994. The Convention establishes residential care as a less readily utilized option.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child, tasked with implementing the Convention's provisions, requested a review of the residential care centre approach to foster placement care in Japan. In 2010, the Committee issued several recommendations, strongly urging Japan to reform its social foster care services and to improve the foster parent placement rate. As a result, the Japanese Government is reorganizing measures to arrange for foster parent placement to be at the centre of service provisions.

Foster parent placement and the Child Welfare Law

In 2011, the Japanese Government established the Committee on the Future Vision of Social Foster Care to address various issues related to social services, including foster parent placement, and summarized its findings in a document titled 'Challenges and the Future Vision of Social Foster Care'. Finally, the revised Child Welfare Law in 2017 indicated that when considering where to place children in social foster care, priority must be given to options that can provide a nurturing environment closer to home.

The Japanese foster system lacks support for parents

The Japanese foster parent support system does not sufficiently support foster parents. It is also clear from the increase in the number of children transferred from foster parents to care facilities. It has increased year by year, 2003: 269, 2008: 448, 2013:615, 2018: 619 (year: number). In addition, the survey we conducted a questionnaire survey on foster parents nationwide in 2017: 17% of foster parents answered that they experienced foster care breakdown. So, I researched to develop a foster parent support program to reduce this ever-increasing foster care breakdown.

We interviewed foster parents to clarify the current situation and problems in raising their foster children.

We asked foster parents what they were struggling with and what kind of services they needed. As a result, our survey shows that two factors cause difficulties foster parents face in raising foster children. These two factors involve life story work to organize their foster children's history and the damaging effects of child abuse.

Life story work to organize their foster children's life history

The most distinctive feature of foster parenting is that the child is generally raised from the middle of their life. Therefore, there is a past that foster parents and foster children cannot share. If there is no interaction with the biological parents, the foster children have concerns about finding their own roots, such as who their real parents are.

“...the foster parent placement rate is increasing. The foster parent placement rate in 2020 is 22.8%, more than double the 10% in 2007, 13 years ago”

Many foster children worry about identity, who they are and how they should live. This process is critical for a foster child to become an adult. Life stories work to organize the upbringing of all children living away from their parents. Many foster parents often feel the need to organize their foster children's life history.

The damaging effects of child abuse

As the number of abused children rises, it becomes increasingly challenging to care for them adequately. This is due to the damaging effects of the environment surrounding child abuse and how it impairs a child's development. Sugiyama (2007), a child psychiatrist, pointed out the characteristics of abused children: nearly all of them show borderline intelligence, have difficulty learning and exhibit hyperactivity behavioural disorder features. He further indicated that many abused children had poor control over their impulses and displayed panicked behaviour, even over minor issues.

Furthermore, Sugiyama found that traits commonly found in people with developmental disabilities are also present in abused children. Research shows that 28.5% of children in Japanese social foster care have some disability. Meanwhile, the number of children with developmental disorders is increasing yearly. Developmental disorders are often noted as risk factors for child abuse because many parents of children with developmental disabilities have difficulties raising their children. The authors would like to emphasize that many abused children have behavioral characteristics classified as developmental disorders, and the increase in the number of such children makes it difficult to provide adequate care for them in social foster care, including foster parent placement.

So how do we meet the needs of foster parents?

We developed the foster parent support program to meet foster parents needs. This program is based on life story work plus cognitive and behavioral parent training. Each five weekly, two-hour training session was designed to teach the following contents.

- Introduction of life story work: Knowing to organize their foster children’s life history.
- Cause and Effect: Using consequences to change children’s behavior.
- Effective praise: Using praise effectively and often.
- Staying calm and teaching your child self-control: Make a plan to stay calm and teach your child self-control.
- Putting together: Developing a plan for life story work and parenting skills.

Ten foster parents who completed a five-week program answered the Family Satisfaction Scale. As a result, when asked, “Was this program useful for you as a foster parent in raising your child?” one person answered, “very satisfied”, and nine answered, “satisfied”. Likewise, when asked, “Did this program bring about positive changes in your family?” one person replied, “Very satisfied”, five answered “satisfied”, and four answered, “somewhat satisfied”. Also, all of them responded that they were satisfied with the questions about the appropriateness of the teaching materials and how to proceed with the program.

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