



Behavioural challenges among foster children in South Africa: Social Workers' perspectives on the contributing factors

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ABSTRACT

Foster care remains one of the forms of alternative care for orphans and vulnerable children in several countries across the globe. Social workers play a key role in placing children in foster care and supervising them. Some foster children exhibit behavioral problems for various reasons. Therefore, this study sought to explore and describe the perspectives of social workers on factors influencing behavioral problems among foster children. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, with two research designs: exploratory and descriptive. Data were collected from 16 social workers of the Department of Social Development, Mahikeng Service Point, North West Province, South Africa, using semi-structured, in-person interviews, guided by a developed interview guide. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data. The findings of this study showed that participants had different perspectives on factors that contribute to problematic behaviour displayed by foster children. These factors included poor parenting, family dynamics, environmental factors and peer pressure. The study recommends that further research be undertaken on the experiences and perspectives of foster parents who live with foster children with problematic behaviours and how social workers may need to adjust their intervention measures to address the identified behavioural problems. This study contributed valuable information from the social workers' perspectives regarding the factors that play a role in behavioural problems among foster children in South Africa. Additionally, the study included challenges encountered by social workers when working with foster children who display problematic behaviour.

Keywords: Foster Care, Foster Family, Behavioural Problems, Misconduct, Maladaptive Behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Foster care plays a critical role in the South African alternative care system, and it has become an increasingly popular choice for children who cannot be taken care of by their biological families. This approach allows children to grow up in a family environment and build bonds with caregivers, often being preferred over residential care options.¹ South Africa has pledged to protect children in alternative care, as specified in the Children's Act No 38 of 2005, ensuring that its child protection laws align with

¹ UNICEF Eastern and Southern African Regional Office (ESARO), "Supporting Foster Care in Eastern and Southern Africa," 2022.

international standards.² According to the Children's Act, foster care is provided to children identified under Section 150 as needing care and protection.

According to the report Child Series Volume IV, Children Living with Grandparents in South Africa, 2023, approximately 6,7 million grandparents lived with 9,7 million children aged 0–17. Of these grandparents, 69,3% were grandmothers, while 30,7% were grandfathers. A complex interplay of socio-economic pressures, cultural traditions, and migration patterns shape South African household structures. High unemployment and widespread poverty often push families to consolidate resources by living together, while deeply rooted cultural values continue to uphold the importance of extended family networks. Additionally, urban migration has led to housing shortages and the prevalence of multi-generational living arrangements. Social Development's report in May 2024 highlighted that children in South Africa become orphans due to various causes, such as gender-based violence, violent crimes, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in many deaths globally. Consequently, effective placement solutions such as foster care are essential to tackle the growing number of orphans and vulnerable children.³

Despite challenging working conditions, social workers in South Africa continue to make decisions about placing children in foster care.⁴ They are crucial to ensure that children who need care and protection are placed in such settings. According to the scholars, social workers must provide oversight for all foster care-related activities, including comprehensive assessments, which involve stages like intake, prevention, early intervention, and investigations; additionally, they manage the placement or statutory services and supervise these placements. Various factors, , such as experiences of abuse, parental substance abuse, domestic violence, family breakdowns, or strained family relationships can lead to the placement of children in foster care. Duration in foster care can range from a few days to several months or even years, as some children have reported staying in the foster care system until they became adults and started life on their own.⁵

Section 46(1) (f) of the Children's Act No 38 of 2005 requires social workers to offer supervision services in order to evaluate the placement of foster care children. However, Böning and Ferreira and Sibanda and Ndamba⁶ indicate that social workers' caseloads are excessively high, and they also lack the necessary training to deliver high-quality foster care supervision services.⁷ The number of teenagers entering South Africa's welfare system has increased in recent decades, especially in the North West Province, where issues related to risky behaviour among fostered teenagers are among the most prevalent problems in the province.⁸ This is in accordance with the SOCPEN (SASSA System) of June 2023, indicating that 22 888 foster children were receiving the foster care grant in the North West Province, with 7 557 children from Ngaka Modiri Molema District and 2154 from Mahikeng Service Point. On average, at the Tswaing Service Point, each ward social worker manages a caseload of 40 to 50 foster care case files.

Various elements, including the degree of warmth and the disciplinary methods used by foster parents, along with the stress and burden of fostering on these caregivers, have been associated with the behavioural issues observed in foster children.⁹ However, the authors note that there is insufficient research identifying and predicting the factors that cause these difficulties. Researchers pointed out the

² Republic of South Africa., "Children's Act, No. 38 of 2005. Government Gazette.," No. 28944 (Cape Town, 2005).

³ Samuel Osarhiemen Emovon, "Experiences of Foster Parents Caring for Non-Family Related Foster Children in De Deur, Gauteng Province, South Africa" (University of Zululand, 2019).

⁴ Pathamavathy Naicker and Petro Botha, "Foster Care: Yes or No? The Decision-Making Processes of Social Workers Rendering Foster Care Services," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 59, no. 1 (2023): 58–77.

⁵ S. Gudula-Koyana and Y Khanye, "Overview of the Foster Care System in South Africa," *Parliament of the Republic of South Africa*. <https://static.pmg.org.za/190904overview.Pdf>, 2019.

⁶ Sibanda, Siphon, and Felistus Ndamba. "Now the solution is here-social assistance for orphaned children: the extended child support grant." *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 59, no. 1 (2023): 42–57.

⁷ Annelie Böning and Sandra Ferreira, "An Analysis of, and Different Approach to, Challenges in Foster Care Practice in South Africa," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 49, no. 4 (2013).

⁸ Siphon Sibanda and Felistus Ndamba, "Now the Solution Is Here-Social Assistance for Orphaned Children: The Extended Child Support Grant," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 59, no. 1 (2023): 42–57.

⁹ Maria D Salas et al., "Predictors of Behavioural Problems in Foster Children: The Key Role of Impulsivity," *Child & Family Social Work* 21, no. 2 (2016): 146–55.

susceptibility of foster children to behavioural issues, though the precise causes remain ambiguous.¹⁰ The premise of the study was that addressing behavioural issues in foster children requires social workers to share their experiences and challenges, as well as their insights into the factors influencing these behaviours, enabling professionals to provide the best support possible, given that social workers possess firsthand experience with these children. Furthermore, foster care placements often result in difficult and disruptive behaviours, and there is limited understanding or management knowledge available to professionals dealing with these behaviours.¹¹ The study sought to explore the perspectives of social workers on challenges they face when they work with foster children with behavioural problems. The study employed a qualitative research design, and the paper is structured to present the study's background, aim and objectives, a review of the relevant literature, theoretical framework, the methodology, the results and discussion, the conclusion and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that children in foster care face developmental, emotional, and behavioural challenges at rates two to three times higher than their peers.¹² This finding is echoed by, Jacobsen and colleagues who report that these children frequently exhibit significant externalizing and internalizing behavioural issues that persist while in the foster system.¹³ Further evidence highlights that foster children often face behavioural challenges, instability in placements, depression, and elevated school dropout rates.¹⁴ Similar observations stressed that the trauma and poverty experienced frequently by these children contribute to their substantial emotional and behavioural difficulties.¹⁵ There is an expectation that behavioural problems should improve when children enter family foster care, yet this is often unmet, with problems either worsening or remaining unchanged during placement.¹⁶ Some of the problematic behaviours and contributing factors are discussed below.

The types of problematic behaviours normally displayed by foster children

Research comparing behavioural issues in foster children with those in the general population has been conducted extensively.¹⁷ The Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) referred to in South Africa as the Achenbach System of Empirically Based Assessment (ASEBA) found that foster children scored significantly higher on syndrome scales related to social difficulties, thought issues, attention deficits, and rule-breaking behaviour.¹⁸ Research indicates that 19 to 45% of foster children face internalizing issues, while 33 to 60% show externalizing behavioural issues.¹⁹ Examples of these include internalizing behaviours such as depression and low self-esteem, and externalizing behaviours like aggression and delinquency. Moreso, the negative impact may appear internally through anxiety, withdrawal, suicidal thoughts, or self-destructive behaviour, and externally through disobedience, impulsiveness, or violence.²⁰

¹⁰ Delphine West et al., "Behavior Problems in Foster Care, Systematic Review of Associated Factors," *Children and Youth Services Review* 155 (2023): 107240.

¹¹ Sara Mclean et al., "Frameworks for Understanding Challenging Behaviour in Out-of-home Care," *Clinical Psychologist* 16, no. 2 (2012): 72–81.

¹² Wendy Kelly and Karen Salmon, "Helping Foster Parents Understand the Foster Child's Perspective: A Relational Learning Framework for Foster Care," *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 19, no. 4 (2014): 535–47.

¹³ Heidi Jacobsen et al., "Foster Children Are at Risk for Developing Problems in Social-Emotional Functioning: A Follow-up Study at 8 Years of Age," *Children and Youth Services Review* 108 (2020): 104603.

¹⁴ Anne Steenbakkers et al., "Psychosocial Needs of Children in Foster Care and the Impact of Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 27, no. 4 (2018): 1324–35.

¹⁵ Nadia Kuit and Elizabeth H. Ryke, "A Rapid Review of Non-Death Bereavement Interventions for Children in Alternative Care," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, April 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-021-00757-w>.

¹⁶ Johan Vanderfaellie et al., "Children Placed in Long-Term Family Foster Care: A Longitudinal Study into the Development of Problem Behavior and Associated Factors," *Children and Youth Services Review* 35, no. 4 (2013): 587–93.

¹⁷ Michal R Zieff et al., "Psychometric Properties of the ASEBA Child Behaviour Checklist and Youth Self-Report in Sub-Saharan Africa-A Systematic Review," *Acta Neuropsychiatrica* 34, no. 4 (2022): 167–90.

¹⁸ Zieff et al., "Psychometric Properties of the ASEBA Child Behaviour Checklist and Youth Self-Report in Sub-Saharan Africa-A Systematic Review."

¹⁹ Jacobsen et al., "Foster Children Are at Risk for Developing Problems in Social-Emotional Functioning: A Follow-up Study at 8 Years of Age."

²⁰ Fatima I Mmusi, Hanelie Malan, and Alida Herbst, "Parenting Behavior and Attitudes of a Group of South African Foster Parents Caring for Adolescents Presenting with Risk Behavior," *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 41, no. 2 (2024): 287–98.

Factors Contributing to Problematic Behaviour of Foster Children

Inadequate parenting, prior abuse experiences, exposure to violence, parental addiction problems, and unstable or impoverished surroundings have been attributed to poor behaviour.²¹ Additionally, the separation from biological parents and subsequent placement with a caregiver can disrupt foster parents' capacity to accurately interpret the child's behaviour, a crucial component of attentive parenting.

The child-related factors

The emergence of problematic behaviour may be attributed to factors concerning the child, the foster family, and the context of foster placement.²² It is believed that this behaviour is often shaped by psychosocial factors that encompass individual and safety aspects as well as interpersonal and developmental influences. Numerous foster children exhibit behavioural problems resulting from prior trauma and abuse.²³ Common outcomes of child abuse include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and externalising behaviours such as tantrums, aggression, deceit, and theft. Understanding these effects and behaviours can be perplexing to a parent for various reasons. Often, the behaviours may seem to arise "out of the blue" and appear unrelated to the immediate situation, making it challenging for foster parents to handle them.

The factors relating to the foster family

Ineffective parenting practices that may lead to the emergence of challenging behaviour include a lack of established rules, inadequate supervision, inappropriate disciplinary actions, erratic reactions, and neglect of problematic behaviour. Education plays a role in determining how effectively foster parents can parent; those with greater educational backgrounds typically provide superior parenting. Parental stress can negatively affect foster parents' willingness to continue fostering, leading to burnout, which can adversely affect the behavioural development of foster children.²⁴ Higher levels of stress among parents are associated with increased behavioural issues.

Environmental factors

The 2019 coronavirus pandemic and the measures adopted to mitigate its spread profoundly affected children and families across the globe.²⁵ During the initial stages of COVID-19, instances of emotional and behavioural challenges were observed among foster children. The stress levels in children and families have increased due to school closures, remote work, reduced social interactions, and the suspension of extracurricular activities, all adversely impacting children's psychosocial well-being.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was grounded in the Ecological Systems Theory. Since the 1970s, social workers have been greatly impacted by the ecological systems theory, which is focused on how individuals interact with their surroundings to influence their surroundings and vice versa. The theory was applied to analyse the relationships and impacts of social elements in a specific environment.²⁶ Hence, understanding each person's distinct experience within the historical, social and cultural context can be done through the ecological framework. Additionally, the framework offers an engaging, useful method for evaluating difficulties in coping with traumatic experiences, life transitions, environmental pressures and

²¹ Rosina Mnisi and Petro Botha, "Factors Contributing to the Breakdown of Foster Care Placements: The Perspectives of Foster Parents and Adolescents," *Social Work/Maatskaplike Werk* 52, no. 2 (2016): 227–44.

²² Vanderfaeillie et al., "Children Placed in Long-Term Family Foster Care: A Longitudinal Study into the Development of Problem Behavior and Associated Factors."

²³ Kelly and Salmon, "Helping Foster Parents Understand the Foster Child's Perspective: A Relational Learning Framework for Foster Care"; Jacobsen et al., "Foster Children Are at Risk for Developing Problems in Social-Emotional Functioning: A Follow-up Study at 8 Years of Age."

²⁴ Anouk Goemans, Mitch van Geel, and Paul Vedder, "Foster Children's Behavioral Development and Foster Parent Stress: Testing a Transactional Model," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 27, no. 3 (2018): 990–1001.

²⁵ Camille Verheyden et al., "Psychosocial Well-Being of Flemish Foster Children Residing in Their Foster Homes during the COVID-19 Lockdown," *Children and Youth Services Review* 139 (2022): 106535.

²⁶ M Crawford, "Ecological Systems Theory: Exploring the Development of the Theoretical Framework as Con-Coined by Bronfenbrenner," *J Pub Health Issue Pract* 4, no. 2 (2020): 170; Paramjit Singh Jamir Singh and Azlinda Azman, "System Theory and Ecological Approach in Social Work Practice: An Actual Case Illustration," *Asian Social Work Journal* 7, no. 6 (2022): 24–33.

interpersonal factors. The ecological approach in social work takes into account the client's family, community, culture, and policies to identify the systems' interrelationships' strengths and weaknesses and make improvements. Understanding how various systems interact to change and maintain behaviour may become easier with the support of holistic thinking.²⁷

Further, in accordance with Bronfenbrenner, the systems within a person's environment occur at different levels, each of which impacts the individual differently. Bronfenbrenner divided the environment into five systems, namely, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, which was added at a later stage.²⁸ To fully understand the behavioural challenges of foster children, Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasises the significance of taking the ecological systems into account; hence, this study was conducted from the ecological systems perspective, as it was useful in understanding the factors that influence foster children's behavioural problems. The impact of each of the five interrelated systems on a child's well-being is based on how it interacts with the others. To understand how the hierarchical environmental systems in which one operates impact individual or family processes, the following figure illustrates the five ecological levels and the discussion of each level thereafter.

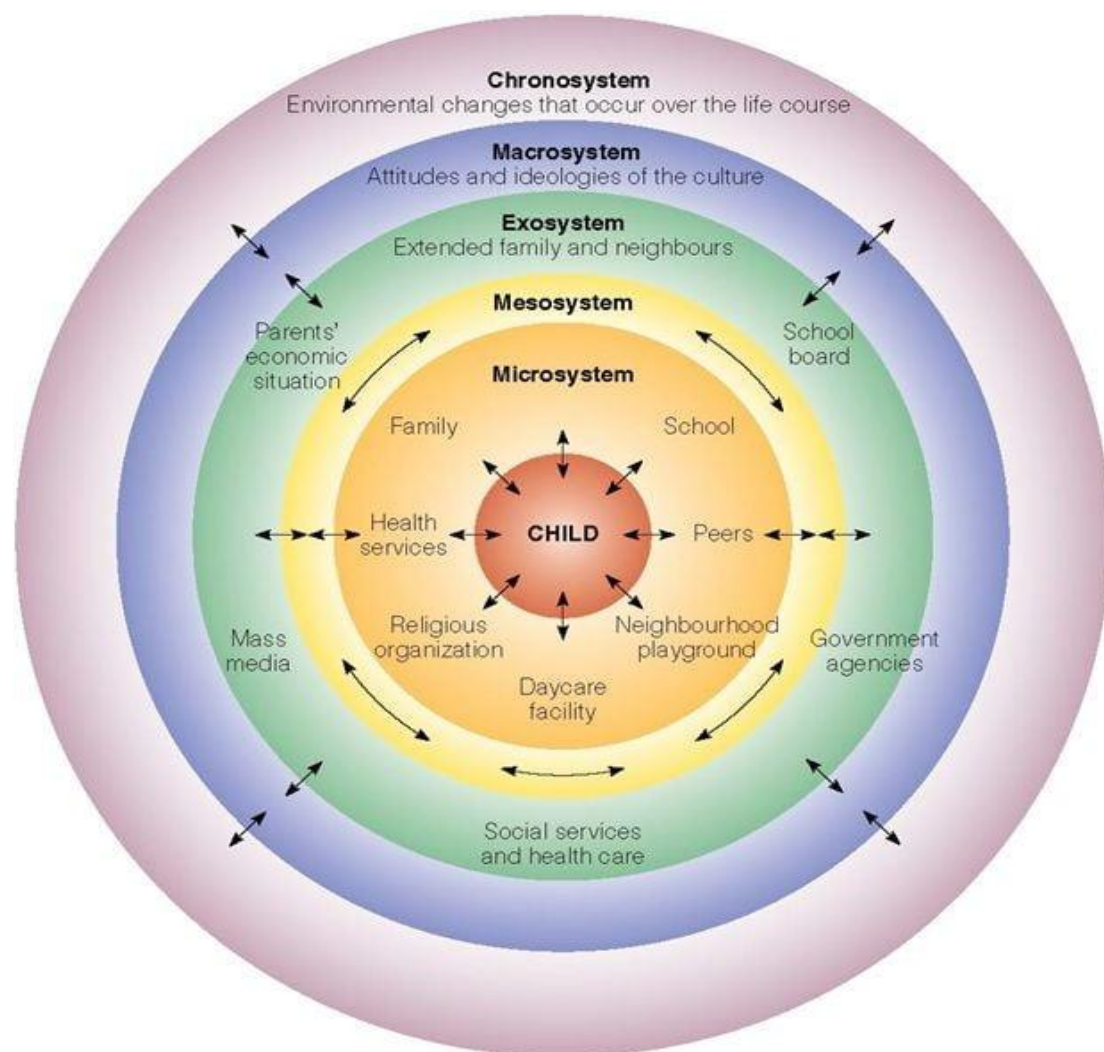


Figure 1 : Ecological factors influencing foster children's behaviour Inspired by Jessica et al.²⁹

²⁷ Singh and Azman, "System Theory and Ecological Approach in Social Work Practice: An Actual Case Illustration."

²⁸ Crawford, "Ecological Systems Theory: Exploring the Development of the Theoretical Framework as Con-Ceived by Bronfenbrenner."

²⁹ Jessica A Stern, Oscar Barbarin, and Jude Cassidy, "Working toward Anti-Racist Perspectives in Attachment Theory, Research, and Practice," *Attachment & Human Development* 24, no. 3 (2022): 392–422.

The microsystem is closest to the child and includes the structures that the child interacts directly with such as, the family, school and peers. The child's relationships and interactions with their immediate environment such as their foster parents may affect the foster child's beliefs and behaviour, but the child also influences the foster parent's behaviour and beliefs. A child's parents, siblings, or family as a whole, as well as their classmates, teachers, and neighbours or the neighbourhood as a whole, are examples of structures in the microsystem.³⁰ Additionally, children in foster care also undergo significant ecological changes or disturbances in their microsystems which may negatively impact their behaviours when they depart from their comfort zones to join the foster family.³¹

A child's mesosystem consists of the interconnections among their various microsystems.³² For example, schools and families are key microsystems that intersect with the child's structured after-school activities, and foster children may experience positive or negative effects depending on the levels of stress and conflict present within these relationships.³³

The exosystem affects the microsystems, even though it does not come into direct contact with the child. This level represents the broader social context in which the child is not an active participant. It consists of various formal and informal social frameworks, such as local government, family friends, and the media.³⁴ For instance, the well-being of a foster child can be significantly shaped by the policies at the foster parent's workplace. Flexible working hours or the option to work from home can enable foster parents to devote more time to their foster children, thereby supporting the child's emotional development and enhancing family relationships.

The macrosystem encompasses the cultural beliefs, attitudes and broader social environment in which children grow up, emphasizing the influence of cultural elements on their development and overall well-being.³⁵ The authors also note that a child's microsystems are shaped by norms and values that arise from prevailing beliefs about gender roles, individuality, family configurations and social concerns.

The chronosystem addresses the role of time in relation to a child's environment. Elements of this system can be internal, such as the physiological developments that a child undergoes as they grow older.³⁶ In addition, external elements may include events such as the death of biological parents. As foster children age, they may react differently to changes in their environment and become more capable of anticipating how these changes will affect them.

The ecological systems perspective demonstrates that human behaviour, the social environment and social functioning are all connected. This means that the foster child's family is influenced by a constant interaction between personal, family and environmental factors. This study examined foster children behavioural challenges from the perspectives of social workers who are responsible for placing them in foster care, and the researcher identified some factors that contribute to foster children's behavioural problems as shown in the conceptual framework below.

³⁰ Andrea Vest Ettekal and Joseph L Mahoney, "The SAGE Encyclopedia of Out-of-School Learning," *Ecological Systems Theory*, 2017, 230–41; Crawford, "Ecological Systems Theory: Exploring the Development of the Theoretical Framework as Con-Ceived by Bronfenbrenner."

³¹ Lauren A Hindt and Scott C Leon, "Ecological Disruptions and Well-Being among Children in Foster Care.," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 92, no. 1 (2022): 39.

³² Crawford, "Ecological Systems Theory: Exploring the Development of the Theoretical Framework as Con-Ceived by Bronfenbrenner."

³³ Ettekal and Mahoney, "The SAGE Encyclopedia of Out-of-School Learning."

³⁴ Hindt and Leon, "Ecological Disruptions and Well-Being among Children in Foster Care."

³⁵ Singh and Azman, "System Theory and Ecological Approach in Social Work Practice: An Actual Case Illustration."

³⁶ Crawford, "Ecological Systems Theory: Exploring the Development of the Theoretical Framework as Con-Ceived by Bronfenbrenner."

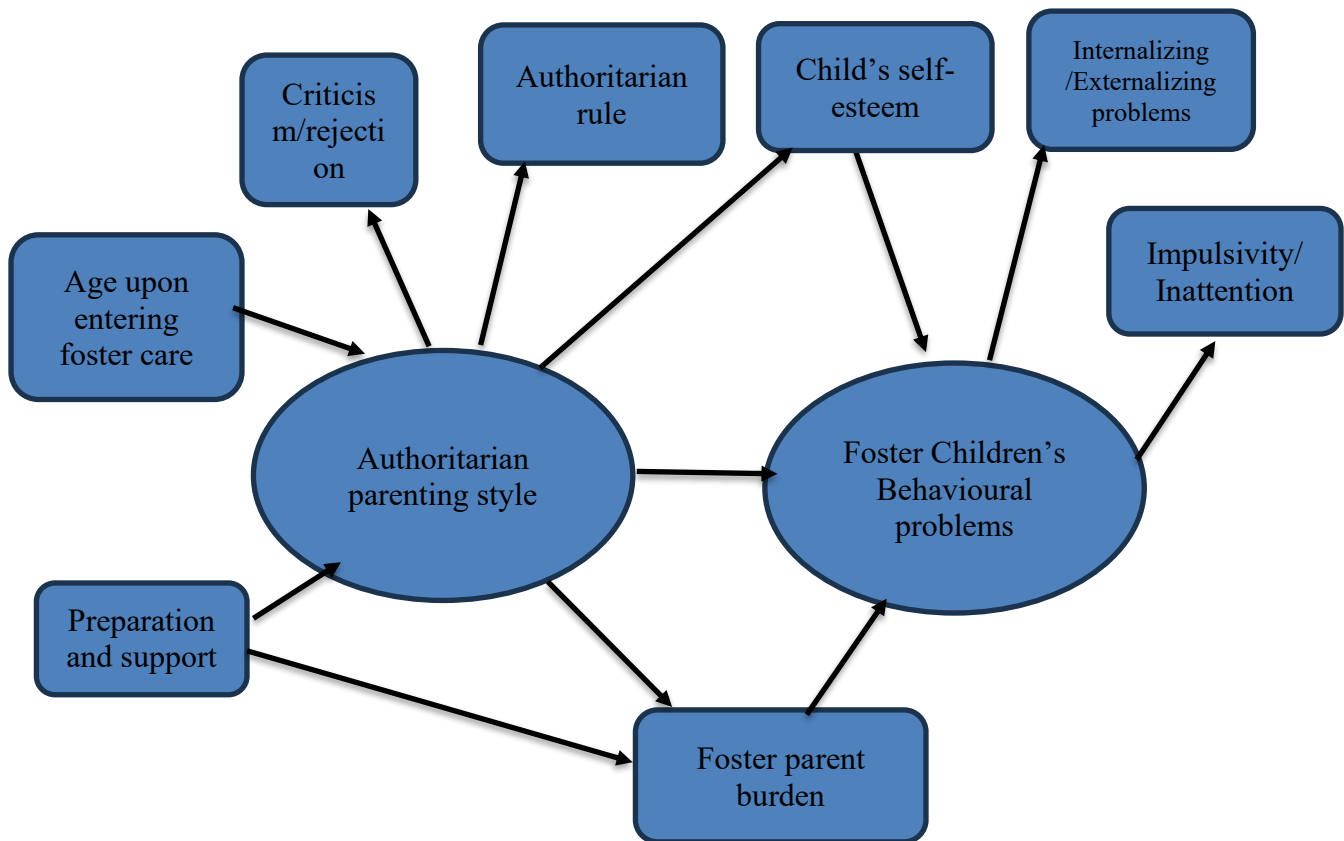


Figure 2: Conceptual model of factors contributing to foster childrens' behavioural problems

Based on the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems, the above conceptual framework Path diagram was established which proposes factors to explain children's behavioral problems in the foster care system.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach to understand the factors contributing to behavioural issues in foster children, from the perspective of social workers at the Mahikeng Service Point of the North West Department of Social Development. It highlighted the use of exploratory and descriptive methods, as it is flexible and unstructured, aims to gain initial insights and formulate hypotheses and is structured and focused on describing the characteristics of a population or phenomenon. An exploratory research design seeks to delve into a topic thoroughly rather than merely providing straightforward answers to research questions. This design was crucial in assisting the research in developing a deep understanding of the influences on foster children's behavioural problems. Meanwhile, the descriptive research design permitted the collection of information from social workers with direct insights into the factors contributing to the problematic behaviours of children in foster care.

Employing social workers of both genders, employed by the Department of Social Development at Mahikeng Service Point, who are involved in foster care services, was due to the large population of foster children within the Ngaka Modiri Molema district. The study included 16 social workers from Mahikeng Service Point of diverse ethnicities, particularly Tswana, Sotho, Zulu, and Colored (see Table 1). Data were obtained through semi-structured, in-person interviews, guided by a developed interview guide and conducted in English, as all participants were proficient in the language. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were being a designated foster care social worker at the Department of Social Development, being registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), having more

than one year's experience working with foster care children who display problematic behaviour, be able to speak and write in English and work under the Mahikeng Service Point. Although the exclusion criteria included social workers who work with foster care children, they do not have experience working with those who display problematic behaviour.

Social workers who work with foster care children with problematic behaviour, but are part of the Child Protection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study. Questions posed included, for instance, "What types of problematic behaviours do you commonly observe in foster children?" and "From your perspective, what factors contribute to these behavioural issues?" These open-ended questions enabled an in-depth exploration of the subject.³⁷

The collected data were subjected to a thematic analysis for examination. Interview insights were processed using the ATLAS.TI 7 data analysis program.³⁸ Social workers' viewpoints on elements leading to behaviour issues among foster children at Mahikeng Service Point were explored through a thematic analysis.³⁹ The methodology entailed familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, assessing themes, defining and naming them, and compiling the final report. Ethical approval was granted by the North-West University Health Research Ethics Committee, and the approval number is NWU-00048-24-A1. The study consistently respected the privacy and anonymity of participants, providing pseudonyms to protect their identities. The authors declare that there was no conflict of interest.

³⁷ C. B. Fouche, H. Strydom, and W. J. H. Roestenburg, *Research at Grass Roots: For the Social Sciences and Human Service Professions*, 5th ed. (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2021).

³⁸ Susanne. Friese, "Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS. Ti," 2019, 1-344.

³⁹ Rosenthal, B. S. & Wilson, W. C. "Psychosocial Dynamics of College Students' Use of Mental Health Services". *Journal of College Counselling*, 19(3), (2016): 194-204.

Table 1: Summary of the demographic information of this study's participants

Participant No	Age	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Years of experience working as a designated social worker	Years of experience working in the field of foster care	Average foster care caseload	Estimated number of cases of foster children who exhibited problematic behaviour encountered during last year
P1	45 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	13 Years	13 Years	40 Files	08 Cases
P2	35 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	07 Years	07 Years	35 Files	More than 05 cases
P3	38 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	08 Years	07 Years	40 Files	10 or more cases
P4	34 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	11 Years	11 Years	52 Files	More than 15 cases
P5	42 Years	Male	Black	Tswana	09 Years	03 Years	40 Files	06 or more cases
P6	47 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	11 Years	08 Years	35 Files	10 Cases
P7	36 Years	Male	Black	Zulu	11 Years	08 Years	Do not have	Do not remember
P8	39 Years	Male	Black	Sotho	11 Years	11 Years	Do not have	10 or more cases
P9	35 Years	Male	Black	Sotho	07 Years	07 Years	45 Files	More than 10 cases
P10	46 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	07 Years	07 Years	35 Files	05 or more cases
P11	35 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	13 Years	13 Years	40 Files	06 Cases
P12	41 Years	Male	Black	Tswana	11 Years	11 Years	Do not have	05 or more cases
P13	46 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	13 Years	13 Years	40 Files	10 or more cases
P14	57 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	07 Years	07 Years	45 Files	More than 05 cases
P15	42 Years	Female	Coloured	Coloured	14 Years	14 Years	Do not have	More than 05 cases
P16	51 Years	Female	Black	Tswana	17 Years	17 Years	45 Files	08 or more cases

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

While foster care is a commendable endeavor to protect the most defenseless children, it comes with its own set of challenges. Among these are situations where children in foster care later develop behavioural issues. Foster parents, as primary caregivers, have the responsibility of addressing the needs and problematic behaviours of foster children.⁴⁰ The authors also highlight that foster parents describe managing these behavioural issues as demanding, stressful, and unrelenting. To support foster parents, many training programs typically offered by child protection services focus on the decision-making involved in caring for children, as well as the relevant laws and regulations. These programs have been criticized for inadequately equipping parents with skills in behavioural management.⁴¹

In this research, themes and sub-themes are employed to display and analyze the findings. The researcher adopted a thematic method for data analysis and interpretation. Throughout the analysis, the researcher transcribed and analyzed the collected data, noting similarities between their coding and the independent coders. The researcher decided to utilize the independent coder's report due to the comparability of the results. Below are some verbatim quotes from participants regarding factors contributing to behavioral issues in foster children.

Theme 1: Intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges and behaviors faced by children in foster care and their need for support.

Participants were requested to “Describe the types of problematic behaviour they normally encounter among foster children”. The central theme that emerged was the intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges and behaviours of children in foster care and their need for support, with five sub-themes beneath it. Generally, social workers reported encountering behaviours such as deviance, disrespect, defiance, delinquency, grief, emotional disturbances, and school-related support issues. The social workers' responses are elaborated below.

Deviant and problematic behaviour

Most participants reported that foster children initiate sexual relationships at a young age, with a particular emphasis on girls, who often leave their foster homes to live with their boyfriends, subsequently leading to pregnancy. This behaviour aligns with the developmental phase of adolescence. Additionally, children who require care and protection are often placed with their grandparents. The age gap between them makes it difficult for grandparents to discuss sexually risky behaviours with their foster children. Here are some quotes from social workers:

“They start initiating romantic relationships and having sex, girls wanting to go out, moving out of the foster parents' house, and sleeping and staying at their boyfriends' houses” (Participant 2).

Just as conversations about condoms and contraceptives may lead foster parents to feel as though they are authorizing their foster children to engage in sexual relations, these parents might think that discussing sexual matters is tantamount to condoning such behaviour. Without sexual education provided at home, foster children are left to draw their own conclusions and make critical decisions, which can sometimes result in unfavourable outcomes. The opinions expressed by Participant 2 above mirror those of Participant 14, respectively, as mentioned below.

“Girls start to engage in sexual relations; they move from their foster parents' house and stay with boyfriends and, as a result, end up pregnant”.

The research literature supports the participants' statements. Studies indicate that foster children are 2–4 times more likely to experience teenage pregnancies and 3–14 times more likely to acquire STIs compared to their peers in the general population. This trend of early unplanned pregnancies and higher STI rates among foster youth can be attributed to the heightened adversity they

⁴⁰ Zintle Ntshongwana and Pius Tanga, “The Life Experiences of Foster Parents Who Nurture Foster Children in Zwelitsha, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa,” *African Journal of Social Work* 8, no. 1 (2018): 14–20.

⁴¹ Kelly and Salmon, “Helping Foster Parents Understand the Foster Child's Perspective: A Relational Learning Framework for Foster Care.”

face, which often leads to risky sexual behaviours, such as engaging in early sexual activity, having multiple partners, and choosing partners with STIs.⁴²

Foster parents struggled to manage adolescents' behaviours, with difficulties in addressing inappropriate sexual activities and substance abuse.⁴³ Sexual health is likely one of the most difficult topics for foster parents to address and some foster parents feel they are not adequately trained or equipped to appropriately discuss such sensitive matters or to engage in conversations about sex with troubled youth.⁴⁴

Disrespectful and defiant behaviour

It is crucial to fully grasp that the challenging behaviours exhibited by foster children impact not only the foster parents but also persist even after being communicated to the social worker. Participants noted that foster children often display disrespectful behaviour, including swearing and non-cooperation during sessions. Additionally, foster parents frequently report that children do not listen to them and insist on receiving the foster care grant. This demand might be driven by the children's desire for costly phones and brand-name clothing. Given that many households in various communities depend on social grants due to high unemployment, foster parents generally cannot afford these high-end items for the children. Participants shared the following insights:

“Uhhh, (pause) those that I encounter mostly include a foster child not listening to his or her foster parents anymore, (counting using fingers) gallivanting on the streets at night, wanting the foster care grant to do as he or she pleases with it, does not want to help with the household chores and even when the foster parent reprimands them, it does not really make any difference anymore” (Participant 7).

Participant 8 collaborated with the previously mentioned participant and noted that disrespect is another common issue faced by foster parents, as they frequently express concerns that foster children are prone to talk back and exhibit disrespectful behaviour during conversations, showing a reluctance to accept discipline.

“Normally, I encounter problematic behaviour such as a child being disrespectful towards his or her foster parents, rebelling against their foster parents, not listening to them, and some of them demand the foster care grant from their foster parents.”

These participant testimonials align with results that a significant number of foster parents reported behavioural issues with foster children, as the children can be self-centered, show minimal empathy, and may act disrespectfully toward others, including their foster parents.⁴⁵ Foster children's laziness is a frequently mentioned challenge among foster parents and social workers, who often interact with foster parents struggling with foster children being unwilling to assist with household tasks.

Delinquency

The study indicates that many foster children are often associated with gangsterism, leading to other troublesome behaviours like substance abuse, as they commonly engage in gang-related activities as members. The following participant quotes support evidence from the study is supported by :

“Another behaviour is gangsterism, and it is also one of the problematic behaviours that I come across, as most boys become part of local gangs. So, all I can say is, it is just a mess; girls are after money, they want a soft life, and boys are part of gangs” (Participant 1).

⁴² Winnie Buyisiwe Nkosi, “Family Adjustment and Support Interventions in Foster Care Families: Experiences of Caregivers and Social Workers in the Amajuba District” (University of KwaZulu-Natal, Howard College, 2020).

⁴³ Mnisi and Botha, “Factors Contributing to the Breakdown of Foster Care Placements: The Perspectives of Foster Parents and Adolescents.”

⁴⁴ Caroline Harmon-Darrow, Karen Burruss, and Nadine Finigan-Carr, “‘We Are Kind of Their Parents’: Child Welfare Workers’ Perspective on Sexuality Education for Foster Youth,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 108 (2020): 104565.

⁴⁵ Ntshongwana and Tanga, “The Life Experiences of Foster Parents Who Nurture Foster Children in Zwelitsha, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa.”

Furthermore, Participant 11 shared the same sentiments as the above participant, stating the following.
“Gangsterism, stealing and in some cases, acting aggressively towards their foster parents. I once had a case of a foster child threatening to burn his foster parent, so sometimes they can really be violent”.

Delinquency is often a consequence of an emotionally inadequate upbringing. It is important to understand the frustrations and deprivations that lead a child to express dissatisfaction in certain ways.⁴⁶ Delinquent acts like theft, assault, or property damage can lead to drug abuse, school dropout, involvement with gangs, incarceration, adult criminal behaviour, injury, and prolonged involvement with the juvenile justice system.⁴⁷ A longitudinal study shows that 57% of those in foster care are likely to engage in delinquent behaviours and face incarceration by ages 25 or 26.⁴⁸ This finding aligns with accounts from practitioners regarding the delinquency often observed in foster children they assist daily.

Grief and emotional disturbances and the need for support

Some participants noted that various foster children have difficulties coping with the absence of their biological parents, leading them to exhibit challenging behaviours that foster parents find difficult to manage. Often, the emotional turmoil caused by losing their parents results in children developing these problematic behaviours. Given that social workers often lack the time to dedicate to grieving families, counselling for children who have lost a parent is not consistently provided. This point was corroborated by Participant 6, who stated that.

“Err... I can also say not receiving counselling after the passing of the parents causes a lot of issues for the child later in life”.

Participant 15 supported this by saying:

“Although they have foster parents, who provide them with the same sense of parental figure, I believe that grieving for their parents who have passed may be another element”.

The participants shared comparable opinions about the emotional health of the foster child. However, it highlighted that the child's family sometimes fails to acknowledge the child's feelings, potentially harming the child's emotional well-being. This situation can be further complicated by potential family conflicts due to custody issues, financial management disagreements, and tensions between the child's maternal and paternal relatives.

“Furthermore, I can say failing to take into account the child's feelings and emotions following the death of their parents, neglecting to sit down and explain what had happened. You know, other family members believe that, since so and so is still a child, they are clueless; the child will even be taken to another relative following a burial, regardless of the child's opinions and feelings” (Participant 5).

Losing a parent is generally difficult at any age, and for children, it can be particularly distressing. It appears that irrespective of age, gender, race, or cultural background, the loss of a loved one impacts everyone.⁴⁹ The death of a parent leaves families financially unstable, deprives mothers and fathers of the support needed to raise their children, and leaves children without parental figures. Foster children frequently display rebellious behaviour due to their parents' death and absence, coupled with a profound grieving process and feelings of helplessness and deep sorrow, for which they require guidance, and foster parents are unprepared for the anger and behavioural changes often seen in children

⁴⁶ Andreea Georgiana Birneanu, “Behavior Problems in Foster Care Children,” *Revista de Asistență Socială*, no. 4 (2013): 15–23.

⁴⁷ T Jones and J McMahon, “Views on Foster Care and Adoption in North Carolina: Fostering Perspectives” 18, no. 2 (2014): 1–16.

⁴⁸ Heather N Taussig et al., “Fostering Healthy Futures Preventive Intervention for Children in Foster Care: Long-Term Delinquency Outcomes from a Randomized Controlled Trial,” *Prevention Science* 22, no. 8 (2021): 1120–33.

⁴⁹ Nkosi, “Family Adjustment and Support Interventions in Foster Care Families: Experiences of Caregivers and Social Workers in the Amajuba District.”

following such a distressing event.⁵⁰ In an international study, 24% of foster children aged between 6 months and 5.5 years exhibited social-emotional problems.⁵¹

School-related issues

Several participants noted that foster parents frequently mention issues related to skipping school, missing classes, neglecting assignments, and eventually dropping out. Teachers similarly raise concerns about disruptive behaviour exhibited by these children in educational settings. Furthermore, there are reports of academic struggles among foster children, potentially due to the lack of homework assistance at home, as some foster parents are not formally educated and are unsure of how to support them. Consequently, the children often feel frustrated, which sometimes leads to behavioural issues within the school. Participants further detail the school-related behavioural problems of foster children below:

“I would say absenteeism and dropping out of school are the only few things that come to my mind” (Participant 4).

“Disruptiveness at school, not being able to be controlled and bunking school” (Participant 7).

Research has highlighted the educational challenges that foster children face, showing that their rates of suspension and expulsion exceed those of non-foster peers, along with frequent moves between foster placements that often mean changing schools as well.⁵² Foster children are prone to experiencing various educational difficulties, which might include underperformance in academics, high absenteeism, disruptive conduct, or even school dropout.⁵³

Foster children are four times more likely to change school districts compared to their peers of the same age and similar socioeconomic status.⁵⁴ This school change can disrupt their microsystem, which may impact mesosystems like the relationships between foster parents and teachers, as well as ecosystems such as teachers' views on foster care and available resources. As a result, these school-related disruptions have been associated with negative behavioural, emotional and academic outcomes.

Theme 2: Relational and environmental influences on foster children, including family and peers

Participants were asked to “Share their perspectives on the factors that contribute to problematic behaviour among foster children”.

The primary theme identified was the impact of relational and environmental factors on foster children, encompassing four sub-themes, namely, parenting, family dynamics, environmental factors, peer pressure and influence. The subsequent sections explore these sub-themes in detail.

Parenting

The study indicates that social workers were concerned about the interactions between foster parents and foster children. Most of them noted that foster parents do not adequately supervise foster children; they behave as if they are ready to care for these children, yet their main incentive seems to be the foster care grant.

Furthermore, teenage foster children are frequently perceived as quite lazy, unwilling to assist with household chores, argumentative, seeking foster care grants, participating in dating activities, and loitering on the streets, making parenting difficult for foster parents.

Participant 2 highlighted that foster parents are not consistently able to provide the love, care, and support that the emotionally vulnerable foster child needs due to having lost both parents.

⁵⁰ Nkosi, “Family Adjustment and Support Interventions in Foster Care Families: Experiences of Caregivers and Social Workers in the Amajuba District.”

⁵¹ Jacobsen et al., “Foster Children Are at Risk for Developing Problems in Social-Emotional Functioning: A Follow-up Study at 8 Years of Age.”

⁵² Brenda M Morton, “The Grip of Trauma: How Trauma Disrupts the Academic Aspirations of Foster Youth,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 75 (2018): 73–81.

⁵³ Michelle Levy et al., “The Educational Experience of Youth in Foster Care.,” *Journal of At-Risk Issues* 18, no. 2 (2014): 11.

⁵⁴ Hindt and Leon, “Ecological Disruptions and Well-Being among Children in Foster Care.”

“Sometimes, it is understandable that foster parents may not always know how to provide the love, care and support that these children deserve, as they have lost their parents and require additional love and attention”.

Several participants noted that the generational divide between foster parents and foster children is a matter of concern, as some placements involve grandparents who may be the sole available and willing caregivers for foster children. Affirms that the generational gap between children and their foster caregivers contributes to challenges in managing problematic behaviour.⁵⁵

“Generational gap between foster parents and foster children, because most of these children are fostered by their grandparents and sometimes the grandparents are illiterate, they lack parenting skills and are just not in touch with the way things are done and the lifestyle that these children are into nowadays, so I think those are the leading factors” (Participant 9).

To ensure effective care for foster children, who often face high-risk outcomes, it is crucial to motivate foster parents to remain diligent and attentive in their roles. When foster parents receive adequate support, reducing their stress and improving their ability to handle disruptive behaviours, parenting effectiveness tends to increase, subsequently leading to improvements in child behaviour.⁵⁶ Discussions with participants align with extensive research that indicates that inappropriate parenting approaches, insufficient affection, inconsistent discipline, and lack of structure from foster parents are linked to elevated behavioural problems in foster children.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the stress levels of foster parents can significantly affect the behavioural adjustment of foster children.⁵⁸ This stress could diminish foster parents' motivation to continue fostering, potentially leading to burnout and negatively impacting the child's behavioural development.

Family dynamics

Respondents indicated that family dynamics play a role in contributing to challenging behaviours in foster children. When entering foster care, the life of the child and the structure of the foster family undergo significant alterations. Most participants observed that numerous foster families display characteristics such as favoritism, where certain children receive more favourable treatment. Additionally, it has been observed that extended family members of foster children frequently meddle in the child's affairs, leading to the development of negative sentiments, causing the child to act disrespectfully and unruly towards foster caregivers. Below are some direct quotes:

“One more contributing factor is the inequality that may exist in the family unit. Foster children occasionally complain that they don't receive equal treatment and that there is a lot of favouritism because they are the only ones who perform household chores when there are other children around, such as their cousins” (Participant 2).

Participant 3 shared similar views with regard to unequal treatment within the family and added another factor, “sibling separation”.

“Sibling separation, unequal treatment or treatment within the family”.

The issue of sibling separation is a notable concern in foster care placements. Establishing relationships, such as those between siblings, can assist children in coping with losses and aid in their positive adjustment.⁵⁹ Having a familiar companion can make the transition to a new environment easier for children, potentially resulting in fewer behavioural issues. Separation from siblings presents a

⁵⁵ Nkosi, “Family Adjustment and Support Interventions in Foster Care Families: Experiences of Caregivers and Social Workers in the Amajuba District.”

⁵⁶ Anne M Maaskant et al., “Effects of PMTO in Foster Families with Children with Behavior Problems: A Randomized Controlled Trial,” *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 523–39.

⁵⁷ Salas et al., “Predictors of Behavioural Problems in Foster Children: The Key Role of Impulsivity.”

⁵⁸ Goemans, Geel, and Vedder, “Foster Children’s Behavioral Development and Foster Parent Stress: Testing a Transactional Model.”

⁵⁹ Sarah A Font and Hyun Woo Kim, “Sibling Separation and Placement Instability for Children in Foster Care,” *Child Maltreatment* 27, no. 4 (2022): 583–95.

significant challenge for children in foster care, representing a profound disruption of their microsystem; therefore, children often prefer to stay with their siblings.⁶⁰ There is a positive connection between well-being and placement features in foster care, where co-placement with siblings enhances mental health, reduces delinquency, improves academic results and increases placement stability.⁶¹

Participant 8 explains that the socio-economic status of foster parents also plays a role.

“I think the overall situation at home, you find that this child, before the passing of their parents, they were living a soft life, you know, parents being able to afford. But now they are placed with a foster parent who is not well off financially, so the child misses having nice things, and they end up stealing just to have nice things again. So, I would say family dynamics is the contributing factor”.

The complex dynamics between foster children and their biological or foster parents can have a profound impact on the individuals involved. A critical aspect of foster care is the potential connection between foster and biological parents. If the birth parents are still alive, this relationship should be nurtured.⁶² The author also highlights that various factors can influence foster children’s behaviour, including cultural heritage, household customs, educational background, lifestyles, economic conditions, parenting styles, and the relationships between biological and foster parents. When biological parents are part of the picture, their interaction and contact can be detrimental, causing disruptions to disciplinary and structural practices and complicating the administration of foster care grants.⁶³

Environmental factors

Most respondents noted that changes in the environment of a foster child have a substantial impact on their life. This encompasses both the community and society where the child lives and the family setting in which they are placed in. Entering an unfamiliar setting and establishing a relationship between the foster child and parents can be a daunting endeavour, as many factors could complicate this transition. This complexity is due to the child's development being connected to the microsystems outlined in the ecological systems theory employed in this research. Participants articulated this conclusion as follows:

“Err... I also think environmental factors contribute to the behaviour. When a child is raised in an environment that is not conducive, everything just becomes a norm, good or bad” (Participant 4).

Participant 8 underscored that a child's life experiences become disrupted when placed in a different environment.

“Sometimes it is moving and changing the environment, changing schools and not having friends that the child used to have before moving to a new place”.

Relocating communities for foster children is associated with adverse effects; such moves can make it difficult for them to engage in activities and forge relationships, while also causing them to feel detached from their cultural, linguistic, religious, and traditional backgrounds. Consequently, this detachment is tied to internalizing symptoms, particularly a diminished sense of identity and belonging.⁶⁴ Children who are in stable surroundings with strong bonds to their foster parents tend to exhibit less disruptive behaviour and perform better in educational settings.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Hindt and Leon, “Ecological Disruptions and Well-Being among Children in Foster Care.”

⁶¹ Shreya Mukhopadhyay et al., “Foster Youth’s Placement Preferences: The Roles of Kin, Siblings, and Age,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 131 (2022): 105761.

⁶² Heather Dickrell, “Exploring Family Dynamics, Mental Health, and Well-Being Among College Students with Foster Care Histories,” 2023.

⁶³ Mnisi and Botha, “Factors Contributing to the Breakdown of Foster Care Placements: The Perspectives of Foster Parents and Adolescents.”

⁶⁴ Hindt and Leon, “Ecological Disruptions and Well-Being among Children in Foster Care.”

⁶⁵ Allison Vreeland et al., “Predictors of Placement Disruptions in Foster Care,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 99 (2020): 104283.

Peer pressure and influence

Participants reported that peer pressure and the sway of other family members within the foster household significantly affect the behaviour of foster children. Commonly, teenage foster children tend to prioritize their peers over relatives, which leads to their conduct at home being shaped by friends. Additionally, they become susceptible to the influence of other family members.

The participants highlighted that peers exert a negative influence on foster children, a finding consistent with the fifth stage of Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which typically occurs during adolescence from ages 12 to 18. During this critical period, adolescents critically evaluate their values, beliefs, and goals to establish their sense of self and identity. Peer influence generally becomes more pronounced as teenagers often value their friends' perspectives over those of their parents.⁶⁶ This is how participants addressed peer pressure as a subtheme:

"I can also say another factor is peer pressure; these children tend to influence each other and copy all the unruly behaviour from each other" (Participant 1).

"Peer pressure is another contributing factor; these children nowadays are exposed to a lot of things, including social media, so they become easily influenced by their peers" (Participant 8).

The adolescent stage is vital to form significant relationships with peers. At this time, peer connections become more deep and can offer attachment and support.⁶⁷ The researchers note that for youth in foster care, especially those who have experienced family or parental disruptions, peer relationships might hold even greater importance. Nevertheless, although peers of similar age provide essential social backing, they can also increasingly contribute to risky behaviours in teenagers when compared to other developmental stages. This aligns with participants' feedback, indicating that 'relationships with peers' are another factor influencing problematic behaviours in foster children.

The involvement of extended family members also has an impact, as many foster parents reported that conflicts with foster children were sometimes due to interference from extended relatives such as aunts and uncles, and community members.⁶⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with the research outcomes and conclusions, several recommendations have been suggested. It is proposed that the capabilities of social workers in child protection services be bolstered by facilitating ongoing opportunities for personal well-being, improvement and job satisfaction. Participants expressed the need for empowerment through short courses and training sessions that address the contemporary challenges faced by foster children. In compliance with regulations set forth by the SACSSP council, social workers can earn CDP points through these short courses and training. Furthermore, the government must prioritize increasing departmental budgets as a national strategic objective to enable the child protection unit to offer extensive services to foster children, particularly those exhibiting behavioural issues. Budget enhancements will also confirm the availability of sufficient resources for social workers, such as necessary tools and funds to organize group activities and incentivize positive behaviour when appropriate during the helping process with the foster child. The study recommends that further research be undertaken on the experiences and perspectives of foster parents who live with foster children with problematic behaviours.

CONCLUSION

The study clearly highlights that social workers frequently encounter foster children who have various behavioural issues. Many participants reported that female foster children often leave their foster homes

⁶⁶ Dustin Albert, Jason Chein, and Laurence Steinberg, "The Teenage Brain: Peer Influences on Adolescent Decision Making," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 2 (2013): 114–20.

⁶⁷ Alana Hu et al., "Peer Relations and Delinquency among Girls in Foster Care Following a Skill-Building Preventive Intervention," *Child Maltreatment* 26, no. 2 (2021): 205–15.

⁶⁸ Nkosi, "Family Adjustment and Support Interventions in Foster Care Families: Experiences of Caregivers and Social Workers in the Amajuba District."

to live with boyfriends, engage in early sexual activities, and subsequently experience early pregnancies. These behaviours are linked to the adolescent stage of development. Additional concerns include a lack of respect and defiance towards foster parents and social workers, as well as demands from foster children for their foster care grants. The study also found reports of foster children becoming involved in gangs, skipping classes, avoiding school, neglecting academic responsibilities, and ultimately dropping out. Moreover, dealing with the loss of biological parents poses challenges for foster children, leading them to exhibit difficult behaviours.

Participants offered diverse yet consistent views on the causes of problematic behaviour in foster children. In particular, social workers expressed concerns about the dynamics between foster parents and foster children, citing inadequate supervision. Some foster parents are perceived to be primarily motivated by financial gain from foster care grants, lacking genuine commitment to parenting, which negatively impacts their parenting style. Family dynamics, such as favouritism toward certain children, were identified as influencing factors. Environmental changes, including new family settings and community or societal contexts, significantly affect foster children's lives. Additionally, peer pressure was recognized as a crucial factor shaping the behaviour of foster children.

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