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Accepted version. *Journal of Family Social Work*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (July 2007): 23-42. DOI. © Taylor & Francis (Haworth Press) 2007. Used with permission.

Maternal Characteristics and Child Problem Behaviors: A Comparison of Foster and Biological Mothers

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The purpose of this exploratory study was to compare the parenting behavior, stress and support of foster mothers and biological mothers of young children. A sample of 60 mothers of young children (30 foster mothers, 30 biological mothers) completed measures of parenting behavior, parenting stress, child problem behaviors, and perceived social support. Findings indicated that biological mothers were single and younger than foster mothers. In addition, biological mothers utilized more verbal and corporal discipline than foster mothers, experienced greater parental distress and received less social support for their parenting. Implications of these findings are discussed.

The theoretical and contemporary research literature on the socialization of children points to the parent as an important force in a child's social development (Collins, Maccoby, Steinburg, Heathering, & Bornstein, 2000). In fact, Maccoby (1992) noted that parents and the familial context are perhaps the most important socializing factors in an individual's life and that early familial socialization practices lay the foundations for the development of social skills, personality, and social orientation.

Although parent-child interactions in the process of socialization were once understood as the parent "molding" a passive child, more recent conceptualizations of parenting emphasize the bidirectional interaction that often occurs between parent and child in the socialization process, in which parent behavior influences the child and the child's behavior influences the parent (Collins et al., 2000; Maccoby, 1992). Given the reciprocal nature of the parent-child relationship, the literature on parenting stresses the importance of addressing the multiple determinants of child outcomes as they relate to socialization. Belsky's (1990) model of parent-child interactions identified three determinants of child outcomes: the child's characteristics, the parent's characteristics, and the social context in which the parent-child relationship is embedded.

Parenting characteristics, particularly parenting style and parenting practices, have received considerable attention in the parenting literature. Darling and Steinburg (1993) identified three characteristics of parents that influence parent-child interactions: (1) the parent's values and goals for socialization; (2) the parent's parenting practices; and (3) the parent's

attitudes toward the child, which they communicate to the child (parenting style). In their model, Darling and Steinburg indicated that parenting style is the emotional climate or context within which parenting practices are employed, and that both of these components of parenting are directly influenced by socialization values and goals. They further delineate the differences between parenting style and parenting practices by noting that parenting practices are the mechanisms by which socialization goals are met, whereas parenting style indirectly affects socialization by changing the parent's ability to socialize their child by influencing the effectiveness of their parenting practices. The moderating effect of parenting style on parenting practices was demonstrated by Brenner and Fox (1999) in a cluster analysis of parenting practices, in which they found differential clusters of parenting practices which corresponded to differential parenting styles.

Although parenting practices are influenced by the values and goals of socialization and moderated by parenting style (Darling & Steinburg, 1993), research on maternal parenting practices indicates that there are a number of parental characteristics, beyond values, goals, and attitudes, which are related to parental practices. Specifically, age, marital status, socioeconomic status, the number of children in the home, and education level has been found to be related to differential disciplinary practices among mothers. Fox, Platz, and Bentley (1995) found that young, unmarried, low-income, less-educated mothers with more than one child in the home were more likely to report the use of verbal and corporal punishment and provide less nurturing behaviors toward their child, suggesting that parental practices are influenced by a multitude of parental characteristics. The idea that there are multiple determinants of parental practices is further supported by intervention research, which indicates that low-income mothers who completed a parent education program demonstrated significant improvement on at least one dimension of parental expectations, parental nurturing behavior or disciplinary practices (Nicholson, Brenner, & Fox, 1999). The complexity of determining parenting practices was demonstrated by Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, and Zelli (2000) who found in their models of parental disciplinary responses that maternal characteristics, including ethnicity, socioeconomic status, parenting beliefs, parental perceptions of the child and parental cognitive-emotional processes, interacted in differential ways to create two pathways to the use of harsh discipline. The authors found that each path to the use of harsh discipline served differential socialization goals and attitudes about the child, such that parents who engaged in disciplinary practices via the reactionary pathway, do so as part of a negative cognitive-emotional reaction to contextual stressors and beliefs about the child's behavior, while parents who engage in disciplinary practices via the proactive pathway, do so based on a

proactive parenting belief that spanking is appropriate and necessary in rearing children. Taken together, this research on parental characteristics and their effects on parenting practices indicate that Darling and Steinburg's (1993) model may not have gone far enough when it comes to understanding what determines parenting practices and child socialization outcomes. Although the parent's values and goals for socialization and their parenting style are important factors in determining parenting practices, as Pinderhughes et al. (2000) demonstrated, these factors are mediated by maternal characteristics, in bidirectional and complex ways, suggesting that understanding parental characteristics is important in determining child socialization outcomes, in conjunction with parenting style, values, and goals.

In examining parental practices, it is important to evaluate the effects these practices play in child development outcomes, as the parent-child relationship and socialization process are reciprocal processes (Maccoby, 1992) in which parenting behavior influences child behavior and child behavior influences parental behavior. Research indicates that parents interact differently with their children depending on the types of behavior the child exhibits, such that mothers whose children exhibit externalizing behavior problems report greater use of verbal and corporal discipline than mothers whose children do not exhibit externalizing behavior problems (Nicholson, Fox, & Johnson, 2005). Similar research looking at the predictors of problem behaviors in young children (Brenner & Fox, 1998) found that parental use of verbal and corporal discipline practices uniquely predicted behavior problems in young children above and beyond maternal characteristics (i.e., marital status, socioeconomic status, age, and education level). Interestingly, mothers who were unmarried, with low-income, younger, and less educated reported the perception of more behavior problems with their children, a finding that replicated results by Fox et al. (1995). Another child characteristic that has been implicated in differential parenting practices is child health status. A study looking at maternal parenting practices of children with congenital heart disease (Carey, Nicholson, & Fox, 2002) found that mothers of children with congenital heart disease had lower developmental expectations for their children than mothers of healthy children. This line of research on parental and child characteristics and their influence on parental practices indicate that, in addition to addressing parental characteristics and parenting style, it is essential to take into consideration child characteristics when identifying parental practices.

The majority of the research on parenting practices, child outcomes, and socialization has been conducted with biological mothers and their biological children. Little is known about the parenting practices of foster parents and their foster children, except perhaps in the domain of discipline practices (Orme & Buehler, 2001). This is particularly alarming, considering the

large number of children placed in foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006) and considering the important role the foster family plays in the foster child's socialization and development. Children placed in foster care may not only face the trauma of abuse and neglect by their biological parents, they are also taken out of their homes and placed in unfamiliar settings with new sets of rules and a different set of standards for behavior. The majority of foster children face poverty, multiple placements, and being separated from their brothers and sisters. They may suffer the effects of maternal alcohol or drug abuse. As a result foster children are overrepresented in mental health settings, even when compared with other groups of economically deprived children (Pilowsky, 1995).

Given the challenges faced by foster children and foster parents, the lack of empirical research investigating the characteristics of foster parents and the foster parent-foster child relationship is striking. In a review by Orme and Buehler (2001) on foster family characteristics, they found that foster mothers had more negative attitudes toward child-rearing than a normative population and higher levels of stress owing to difficult child behavior. Additionally, they found that approximately 15% of foster parents were at risk for utilizing poor parenting practices. However, in this same review, Orme and Buehler indicated that foster parent characteristics such as acceptance, authoritative parenting style, and an affinity for children as a motivator for fostering, have been associated with foster children's social and emotional adjustment. Therefore, although it appears there may be areas of concern regarding foster parenting practices, there are a number of foster parent characteristics that promote the well-being and socialization of the foster child. In fact, Smith (1994) found that positive childrearing practices and positive home environments were related to decreased foster child problem behaviors and, in some cases, improvement in social and emotional well-being.

One parental practice of foster parents that is of concern for Child Welfare Bureaus and has been disproportionately studied, as compared with other parental practices, is discipline practices (Orme & Buehler, 2001). As found in non-foster parent samples (Brenner & Fox, 1998; Nicholson et al., 2005), foster parents' endorsement of harsh disciplinary practices to a hypothetical child behavior situation was related to more aggressive social responses of the foster child to social vignettes (Tripp De Robertis & Litrownik, 2004). However, it should be noted that this study did not directly measure foster mother disciplinary practices and foster child aggression, instead the authors measured foster mother and child responses to hypothetical situations and vignettes. Moreover, the one direct measure of child aggressive behavior used by the authors, the externalizing subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991), was not related to foster mother responses to the hypothetical child behavior problems. Therefore,

this study may have been capturing parental beliefs about how one should respond to problematic behavior, rather than actual parental practices. As the authors noted, the foster mothers indicated they preferred to use teaching and limit setting as their primary disciplinary practices when dealing with their foster child's problematic behavior. In an interesting study comparing biological and foster mothers' discipline practices (Linares, Montalto, Rosbruch, & Li, 2006), there were no differences found between biological and foster mothers in their use of positive, appropriate, and harsh discipline; however, foster mothers reported higher expectations than did biological mothers. The authors also found a significant relationship between foster mother's harsh discipline, high expectations, and child behavior problems, which the authors noted may reflect the foster mother's response to the difficult characteristics of the foster child.

Considering the special context in which foster parents engage in parenting practices, it is particularly important to understand the influence that stress and social support have on foster parenting practices. In a study investigating stress, social support and coping of foster mothers of drug-exposed toddlers, it was found that foster mothers reported normal levels of parenting stress and high levels of parenting satisfaction (Soliday, McCluskey-Fawcett, & Meck, 1994). In addition, the authors found that foster mothers reported the importance of community support, particularly church related support, in maintaining parenting satisfaction and decreasing parenting stress. This finding of the importance of community support is in contrast to findings in non-foster mother samples that indicate that these mothers perceived low-levels of support from the community for their parenting (Middlemiss, 2003). A qualitative study on foster parent perceptions of factors influencing successful parenting (Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003) sheds additional light on the stressors and supports that impact parenting practices of foster parents. Two common themes found among foster mothers were stress associated with getting needed help and services for the foster child and stress associated with dealing with the foster child's problem behaviors. In addition, foster mothers identified the stress related to agency/worker inadequacy or incompetence as affecting successful foster parenting. In terms of support, foster mothers indicated that having a strong faith or connection to one's church was particularly important for successful fostering, as was concern for the child's welfare and support from significant others (family and friends) for their reasons for choosing to foster a child.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an exploratory investigation of parenting behavior, stress and support of foster mothers of young children and how these parenting factors compare with biological mothers of young children. In an attempt to address the gap in the literature regarding foster mother characteristics and behavior, and consistent with previous research on non-foster parent characteristics and behavior, the current study measured parental

discipline, nurturing behavior, parental expectations, parental stress, perceived social support and perceptions of the child's problem behaviors.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 60 mothers and their children were recruited from the community to participate in this study. The sample consisted of 30 mothers caring for foster children and 30 mothers caring for their biological children. Foster mothers were recruited through social service agencies and other organizations that support foster parents in a large Midwestern city. The social service agencies identified and sent by mail, recruitment notices to potential participants. All foster mothers who responded to the recruitment notices were included in the sample. The biological mothers were solicited from day care centers in the same urban area in an effort to have the foster and biological mothers' samples similar in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds. The same recruitment procedure was used with day care directors contacting mothers with the first 30 interested mothers included in the sample. Table 1 provides the demographic data for the foster and biological mothers and foster and biological children.

For the purpose of comparing the two samples, *t*-tests were used for continuous variables and Chi-square tests were used for categorical variables. Foster mothers and biological mothers differed on age, with foster mothers being significantly older than biological mothers ($t(2, 58) = 8.98$, $p < .05$) and marital status, with biological mothers more likely to be single-never married, ($t(2, n = 60) = 23.08$, $p < .05$). The typical biological mother was single-never married, African American, had an income of less than $20,000 per year, was in her mid-to late-twenties, had slightly less than a high school education, and worked full time. The typical foster mother was previously married (i.e., divorced, separated, or widowed) or currently married, African American, had an income below $40,000 per year, was middle-aged, had a high school education and worked full time. Foster children's ages ranged from 2.1 to 4.9 years and biological children's ages ranged from 1.7 to 5.3 years. As shown in Table 1, foster children and biological children did not differ significantly on any of the demographic variables.

Procedure

Mothers who responded to the recruitment notices were asked to complete contact information forms at the agency or organization in order to be later contacted for participation in the study. The mothers who completed the contact information forms were then contacted, by a researcher, who described the study and asked whether they would be interested in participating.

All mothers who completed contact information forms and were contacted by the researcher (30 foster mothers and 30 biological mothers) agreed to participate in the study. After agreeing to participate in the study the researcher and the participant scheduled an at-home interview appointment for about an hour and a half to two hours. Signed informed consent, approved by the university's internal review board, was obtained and participants completed the interview and the entire battery of instruments in one sitting. Participants were given a copy of the instruments to read along with the researcher. The researcher recorded the participant's responses.

Instruments

Family Information Form*.* The Family Information Form was developed specifically for this study to collect demographic and background information on the mother and child. Information gathered by this form included mother's age, family income, marital status, race/ethnicity, number of hours worked per week, child's age, child's gender, and type of preschool attended by the child.

Parent Behavior Checklist (PBC). The Parent Behavior Checklist (Fox, 1994) is a 100-item inventory which measures parenting behavior and parent expectations of their child. The PBC consists of three subscale scores: Discipline, Nurturing, and Expectations. The Discipline scale yields a score ranging from 30 to 120 that measures the degree to which the parent utilizes verbal and physical (corporal) punishment with their child. High scores on the Discipline scale indicate greater use of verbal and corporal punishment. The Nurturing scale yields a score ranging from 20 to 80 that measures specific parenting behaviors which promote the child's psychological growth. Higher scores on the Nurturing scale indicate greater use of positive nurturing behavior. The Expectations scale yields a score ranging from 50 to 200, which measures the parent's developmental expectations of their child. Higher scores indicate greater developmental expectations of their child. The PBC subscales have demonstrated good internal consistency, with coefficient alphas ranging from .82 to .97 and good test-retest reliability over a 1 week period (correlation coefficients ranging from .81 to .98).

The Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (PSI-SF). The Parenting Stress Index-Short Form (Abidin, 1995) is a 36-item instrument that measures a parent's perceived level of stress in their role as a parent. The PSI-SF yields three subscale scores (Parental Stress, Difficult Child and Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction), a total stress score and one validity scale score (Defensive Responding). The Parental Distress score ranges from 12 to 60 and assesses the level of distress the individual is experiencing in their role as a parent as a function of personal factors that are directly related to parenting (i.e., impaired sense of parenting competence,

stresses associated with the restriction of other life roles, conflict with child's other parent, lack of social support, and presence of depression). The Difficult Child scale score ranges from 12 to 60 and assesses the degree to which the child's behavior makes the child difficult or easy to manage. The Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction scale score ranges from 12 to 60 and assesses the degree to which the respondent perceives that the child does not meet their expectations and the degree to which interactions with their child are not reinforcing to them as a parent. The Total Stress Score (range of 36 to180) assesses the overall level of parenting stress an individual is experiencing. The Defensive Responding score measures the degree to which the respondent approaches the questionnaire with a strong bias to present the most favorable impression of themselves. A raw score of 10 or below is the suggested cutoff score for identifying potentially biased PSI-SF protocols. The PSI-SF correlates highly with the long form of the PSI (r = .94) indicating good construct validity. The PSI-SF subscales produce moderate to good reliability coefficients ranging from .78 to .80. Overall, the PSI-SF has good internal consistency with a coefficient alpha of .91 and test-rest reliability of .84 for the Total Stress Score.

Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory-Parent Form (ECBI). The Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (Eyberg & Pincus, 1999) is a 32-item inventory that assesses behavior problems common in children 2 to 16 years of age and the frequency of these problem behaviors. The ECBI yields two scores: an Intensity Score and a Problem Behavior Score. The Intensity Score (range of 36 to 252) reflects the frequency that the problem behaviors occur and the Problem Behavior Score (range of 1 to 36) reflects the number of problem behaviors the child exhibits. The ECBI has demonstrated discriminate validity in its ability to identify children with problem behaviors from those without problem behaviors. The ECBI demonstrates good internal consistency, test-retest reliability at 12week intervals and inter-rater reliability.

Parent Support Questionnaire. The Parent Support Questionnaire was developed for this study to assess the type of support received by mothers and how helpful they felt the support was to them. The questionnaire assessed six sources of support: Immediate Family, Extended Family, Printed Material, Community Resources, Professionals, and the Bureau of Child Welfare. Foster parents were the only participants who completed the item regarding the Bureau of Child Welfare. The questionnaire asks how frequently the mother received support from the six different sources listed above, rating each source from 1 (Rarely/ Never) to 10 (Very frequently). In addition, the questionnaire asks how helpful this support was to the mother, rating the helpfulness of the source from 1 (Not helpful) to 10 (Very helpful). The Parent Support Questionnaire demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .74). The questionnaire was scored by summing the ratings on each of the 10 items together to obtain a

total support score (range of 10 to 100). The item pertaining to the Bureau of Child Welfare was not included in the total score, as foster mothers were the only participants who completed the item. In addition to obtaining ratings of the frequency and quality of support obtained from the five support domains, comments were solicited from participants to provide information regarding the specific types of support obtained.

Results

A series of multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to investigate differences in foster and biological mothers' parenting behavior, parenting stress and child problem behavior. Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, and range of scores for foster and biological mothers on the dependent variables. For each MANOVA conducted, mothers' classification (foster or biological) was entered as the independent variable. If a statistically significant MANOVA was found, a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) follow-up tests were conducted to investigate the source of the difference between foster and biological mothers.

Parenting Behavior

The raw scores of the Expectations, Discipline, and Nurturing sub-scales of the Parent Behavior Checklist (PBC) were entered as the dependent variables to investigate differences in parenting behaviors. The MANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between foster and biological mothers on the PBC (Wilk's l = .78, $F(3, 56) = 5.08$, $p < .05$). The follow-up ANOVAs revealed a statistically significant difference between foster and biological mothers on the PBC Discipline subscale ($F(1, 58) = 5.83$, $p < .05$), with biological mothers reporting higher use of verbal and corporal punishment ($M = 46.4$, $SD = 14.0$) than foster mothers ($M = 39.06$, $SD = 8.9$). No statistically significant difference was found between foster and biological mothers on the PBC subscales of Expectations ($F(1, 58) = 1.93$, $p > .05$) and Nurturing ($F(1, 58) = 2.26$, $p > .05$).

Parenting Stress

The 4-scale scores from the PSI-SF (Total Stress, Parental Distress, Difficult Child and Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction) were entered as the dependent variables to investigate differences in parenting stress. A statistically significant difference was found between biological and foster mothers on PSI-SF scores (Wilk's l = .704, $F(4, 55) = 5.77$, $p < .05$). The follow-up

analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between foster and biological mothers on Parental Distress ($F(1, 58) = 6.21$, $p = .01$), with biological mothers reporting higher levels of Parental Distress ($M = 30.6$, $SD = 9.5$) than foster mothers ($M = 25.4$, $SD = 6.28$). No significant difference was found between foster and biological mothers on the Difficult Child Scale ($F(1, 58) = .47$, $p = .49$), Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction ($F(1, 58) = 2.46$, $p = .122$) and Total Stress Score ($F(1, 58) = .074$, $p = .78$). Foster and biological mothers differed significantly on the validity scale of Defensive Responding ($t(2, 58) = 2.12$, $p < .05$, with biological mothers obtaining a higher mean score of 18.50 ($SD = 5.21$), than foster mothers ($M = 15.76$, $SD = 4.73$).

Child Problem Behaviors

The Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI) Intensity and Problem Behavior Scores were entered as the dependent variables to investigate differences in perceptions of child problem behaviors. The MANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between foster and biological mothers on ECBI scores (Wilk's l = .859, $F(2, 57) = 4.68$, $p < .05$). The follow-up ANOVAs revealed no significant differences between foster and biological mother's Intensity ($F(1, 58) = 1.89$, $p = .174$) or Problem Behavior Scores ($F(1, 58) = .781$, $p = .38$).

Parent Support

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to investigate differences in foster and biological mothers' frequency of use of and perceived quality of support received for parenting. Total scores from the Parent Support Questionnaire were entered as the dependent variable and mother classification (foster or biological) was entered as the independent variable. The ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between foster and biological mothers on the amount and perceived quality of support received for parenting ($F(1, 58) = 6.7$, $p < .05$), with foster mothers reporting higher frequency and quality of support ($M = 66.26$, $SD = 20.47$) than biological mothers ($M = 52.93$, $SD = 19.19$).

As the Parent Support Questionnaire evaluated the frequency and quality of support received from a variety of sources, a series of independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to investigate differences between foster and biological mothers on the types of support and quality of support that they receive. A statistically significant difference was found between foster and biological mothers on two sources of support, in which foster mothers reported more frequent use of immediate family support ($M = 7.76$, $SD = 2.89$) than biological mothers ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 3.42$; $t(2, 58) = 2.40$, $p = .02$) and more frequent use of community resources ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 3.65$) than biological mothers ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 3.44$, $t(2, 58) = 2.11$, $p = .039$). No statistically

significant differences were found for the other sources of support between foster and biological mothers. No statistically significant difference was found between foster and biological mothers on how helpful they found the support resources to be (all *p*-values >.05). However, two analyses for quality of support (Immediate Family and Professionals) did approach significance, at the .06 and .08 level, respectively, with foster mothers reporting higher quality of support for both Immediate Family (M = 8.13, SD = 2.87) and Professionals (M = 7.06, SD = 3.69), than did biological mothers (M = 6.56, SD = 5.4; M = 5.4, SD = 3.73). For the questions regarding the Bureau of Child Welfare, foster mothers reported a mean frequency of support received from this source of 3.5 (SD = 2.8) and a mean of 4.0 (SD = 3.33) for how helpful the support was from this source.

Qualitative Data on Social Support

Foster and biological mothers were asked the following question as part of the Parent Support Questionnaire, “What specific types of support do you receive?” Each mothers’ answer was recorded by the interviewer and later transcribed. An exploratory content analysis was conducted on the interview data and themes were developed for each interview response. All themes were reviewed separately for foster and biological mothers. An independent reviewer provided content validation by reviewing the emerging themes.

Six common themes and three unique themes were identified for foster and biological mothers (Table 3). Both foster and biological mothers identified immediate and extended family as being the most frequent type of support they received. However, the quality of this support for foster and biological mothers differed, in that biological mothers indicated that their mother and sisters provided them with support and that this support was given in the form of advice, child care, praise, reassurance, and respite. On the other hand, foster mothers identified a wide range of immediate and extended family members as providing support and that this support was provided through acceptance and inclusion of the foster child in family activities and “treating the child like it was one of their own.”

The importance of the church in supporting both foster and biological mothers was another common theme. Foster mothers felt that they received emotional support and guidance from their church and that the foster child received structured activities to engage in. Biological mothers identified similar types of support from their church community; however, biological mothers also indicated that the church provided child care and material goods for them (e.g., clothing and diapers).

Biological mothers identified written materials as their second most frequent type of

support. All biological mothers identified parenting magazines as being particularly important in helping them learn proper parenting practices and how to deal with problem behaviors, such as temper tantrums and how to discipline. Foster mothers identified written materials as the third most frequent type of support they received. Foster mothers, unlike biological mothers, identified books and pamphlets that dealt with specific behavior disorders, such as attention deficit disorder and autism, rather than parenting magazines for their sources of information.

Foster mothers identified their child's therapist as an important source of support, while biological mothers identified their child's pediatrician as the source of professional support they receive. The other difference in the identified themes of support between foster and biological mothers is that biological mothers identified their child's paternal family as a source of support for them. Those biological mothers who identified the child's paternal family as a type of support, clarified that the support they receive is in the form of child care and it is not in the form of financial or personal/emotional support.

Discussion

The current findings, though exploratory in nature, indicated that foster and biological mothers, while being similar on a number of maternal factors, differed in important ways. The difference found between maternal groups on disciplinary practices, may reflect the differences between foster and biological mothers on age and marital status. Previous research (Fox et al., 1995) has found that younger, single mothers were more likely to utilize verbal and corporal disciplinary practices with their children. The current findings are consistent with this literature, as the biological mothers in the current sample were younger, single, and never-married, as compared with the older and previously married foster mothers. A second possible explanation for the difference between the maternal groups on disciplinary practices may have to do with the special social context in which foster mothers parent, that is to say under the rules and guidelines of the Bureau of Child Welfare. This special social context provides two possible explanations for why foster mothers reported less use of verbal and corporal discipline. The first possibility is that foster mothers may be under-reporting their use of verbal and corporal punishment, as it is prohibited by the Bureau of Child Welfare. On the other hand, it is possible that this sample of foster mothers did in fact engage in less verbal and corporal punishment, possibly owing to their having more parenting experience and knowledge than their younger biological mother counterparts. It is difficult to determine whether the differences obtained in this study reflect response bias (i.e., under reporting of behavior) or actual disciplinary practices of foster parents. The literature is inconsistent in its findings regarding foster mother discipline practices, with

some studies reporting greater use of harsh discipline by foster mothers (Linares et al., 2006) and others reporting the use of noncorporal disciplinary practices with their foster children, though the same foster mother produced harsh disciplinary responses to hypothetical situations (Tripp De Robertis & Litrownik, 2004). However, foster mother responses on the other parenting behavior scales (i.e., nurturing and expectations) provide some evidence that the data reflect actual behavior rather than a response bias. If foster mothers were in fact misrepresenting themselves in an attempt to appear more competent as parents, we would expect that there would be a response bias both on negative as well as positive behavior scores. However, this was not the case with current findings, as foster mothers reported similar levels of positive nurturing behavior as biological mothers.

An interesting finding of the current study is the similarity between both maternal groups in their experience of parenting stress. Specifically, foster and biological mothers reported similar levels of parenting stress related to managing their child's behavior and their interactions with their child. However, the one dimension of parenting stress that foster and biological mothers differed on was stress related to the parent's personal issues, such as lack of social support, depression, poor parenting-efficacy and conflicts with the child's other parent. Similar to parenting behaviors this finding may reflect, in part, the maternal characteristics of the younger and single biological mothers. In fact, level of parental distress was moderately negatively correlated with age ($r = -.22$), indicating that the younger mothers in this particular sample experienced higher levels of parental distress.

An additional factor possibly driving the difference in parental distress between foster and biological mothers may be because of differences in social support. Foster mothers reported higher levels of overall perceived social support as compared with biological mothers. Moreover, biological mothers reported significantly less support from immediate family and the community at large for their parenting. These findings largely reflect the themes derived from the qualitative interview data, in which foster mothers noted the importance of immediate family and community support for feeling connected, accepted, and understood, whereas biological mothers' responses highlighted the material support they received in the form of goods and services (e.g., childcare) rather than emotional support. These findings suggest that foster mothers engage in parenting in the context of a larger community in which immediate and extended family, and their church play an important role in supporting their parenting endeavors, whereas biological mothers appear to be engaged in parenting in a mostly solitary context with occasional support from immediate family. The differences obtained between the maternal groups on community support is consistent with previous research (Soliday et al., 1994; Middlemiss, 2003); however, the current

study differs from these previous findings in that the previous literature focused on one maternal group (i.e., foster mothers or biological mothers), whereas the current study focused on both and was able to directly compare differences in perceptions of social support.

Previous literature (Orme & Buehler, 2001) has indicated that foster parents are at high risk for engaging in poor parenting practices. However, the current study indicates that this particular sample of foster mothers are fairing well in their parenting practices, level of parenting stress and social support. This conclusion is further bolstered by the similar levels of problem behaviors reported by both maternal groups. While this finding should be interpreted with caution, as the variability of scores was large and the findings are based on a convenience sample, it suggests that the foster mothers in this sample as a group are engaging in effective parenting practices that should provide an environment which fosters the re-socialization process. This positive picture of foster mothers of young children indicates that foster mothers and the young children they care for, may benefit from greater support from Child Welfare Bureaus, such that foster mothers are incorporated into the system of care and work collaboratively with case workers to establish the best environment for the foster child.

Contrary to what would be expected from the literature (Orme & Buehler, 2001), in our sample biological mothers appear to be struggling in terms of parenting practices, parenting stress and social support. These findings indicate that young, single mothers may benefit from education and support for their parenting. In fact, the current findings indicated that as a group the biological mothers in this sample are mostly on their own in terms of educating themselves on effective parenting practices through the use of parenting magazines and receive little to no encouragement or emotional support for their parenting. This suggests a possible point of intervention for young, single mothers of young children that focus on developing and strengthening emotional support and increased access to parenting education.

The current exploratory study is one of only a few in the literature that directly compares foster and biological mothers on maternal characteristics, however there are a number of methodological limitations that need to be addressed. First, the current study employed convenience sampling procedures, which ultimately led to disparities between the foster and biological mother groups on two demographic variables, age, and marital status. These disparities limit the generalizability of the current findings, as the obtained sample may reflect a bias in the sample in favor of the foster mother group. Additionally, the sample was not representative with regard to ethnicity, with participants overwhelmingly belonging to one ethnic group. Future research should attempt to match foster and biological mothers on important demographic characteristics in order to better understand what is driving any differences in

parenting practices between these two groups. Also this study relied heavily on interview data and self-report instruments both of which can have a social desirability bias or be subject to a defensive response set. One of the study's instruments (PSI-SF) included a Defensive Responding scale. Although foster mothers scored significantly lower than biological mothers suggesting more guarded responses, the average defensive scale scores for both groups were well above the cutoff score used to identify defensive response sets. Finally, the instrument used to measure social support, the Parent Support Questionnaire, was developed specifically for this study and thus has no psychometric evidence of its validity as a measure of the construct of social support.

The current literature on foster mother characteristics and parenting practices is limited and often contradictory in its conclusions. Future research should continue to focus on directly measuring, whether through observation or self-report, foster mother characteristics and parenting behavior.

Notes

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Table 1: Demographic Variables for Foster and Biological Mothers and Target Children.

Variable	Foster			Biological		
	Mean (*SD*)	n	%	Mean (*SD*)	n	%
Age	50.1 (12.16)	30		27.63 (6.3)	30	
Ethnicity						
African American		21	70.0		25	83.3
European American		6	20.0		1	3.3
Hispanic		1	3.3		2	6.6
Other		2	6.6		2	6.6
Work (hours/week)	39.53 (12.88)	30		37.53 (9.61)	30	
Education level	12.6 (2.15)	30		11.83 (2.43)	30	
Marital status	12.6 (2.15)	30		11.83 (2.43)	30	
Single, Never married		8	26.6		26	86.6
Divorced/Separated		14	46.6		4	13.3
Married		8	26.6		0	0.0
Income (US$)						
< 20,000		14	46.6		22	73.3
20,000-40,000		11	36.6		5	16.6
> 40,000		5	16.6		3	10.0
Target child age	3.55 (0.85)	30		3.18 (0.99)	30	
Target child sex						
Female		16	55.3		14	43.6
Male		14	43.6		16	55.3

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges for the Dependent Variables

Dependent Variables	Foster			Biological		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
PBC Expectations	142.73	30.96	79-198	132.06	28.39	76-174
PBC Discipline	39.06	8.95	30-68	46.40	14.00	31-89
PBC Nurturing	65.80	8.43	45-77	63.10	5.02	54-73
PSI Total Stress	80.90	16.58	55-125	79.50	22.88	37-140
PSI Parental Distress	25.40	6.28	14-41	30.60	9.53	12-48
PSI Difficult Child	29.96	9.03	17-55	28.33	9.24	13-45
PSI Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction	23.86	6.13	13-36	21.03	7.75	12-47
PSI Defensive Responding	15.76	4.73	8-26	18.50	5.21	8-31
ECBI Intensity	121.06	57.76	58-367	104.30	33.33	42-171
ECBI Problem Behavior	8.66	8.68	0-33	10.50	7.32	0-26
Parent Support Questionnaire Total Score	66.26	20.47	25-100	52.93	19.19	14-96

Table 3: Foster and Biological Mothers Identified Types of Social Support

Type of Support	Number of Foster Mother Respondents (n = 30)	Number of Biological Mother Respondents (n = 30)	Sample Comments
Immediate and extended family	13	20	Foster mother's parents provide emotional support affirms she is doing a good job.
Church	13	6	Provides emotions and spiritual support and guidance.
Written material	5	17	Parenting magazines provide information on discipline and temper tantrums.
Parenting classes	5	6	Positive changes classes helped with foster child's problem behaviors
Community social services	3	3	Birth to Three
Therapist	3	0	Helped foster child open-up.
Television media	2	3	Dr. Phil is helpful.
Pediatrician/family doctor	0	5	Biological mother was scared because her baby was so small, but the doctor provided assurances and support.
Child's paternal family	0	3	Paternal grandmother provides some child care.