Needed Services for Foster Parents of Sexually Abused Children

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ABSTRACT: Foster parents with little preparation and short notices must often deal with severe emotional and behavioral difficulties of sexually abused children. This article reports on a survey of the services provided to foster parents who care for sexually abused children in a large city in the Northeast United States. Agency directors, social workers and foster parents were asked to respond to mailed questionnaires. The results indicated that foster parents consistently reported that they received less extensive educational and support services than were reported by social workers and directors of foster care agencies. All groups recommend further expansion of training programs for foster parents of sexually abused children.

Introduction

Abused children are usually placed in foster care for protection from further violation and for reception of specialized services. Although reliable statistics are generally unavailable and vary from state-to-state, it is currently estimated that at the national level 175,000 to 300,000 children are in foster care at any given time (American Foster Care Resources, AFCR, 1990). Approximately, seventy percent of the children are placed in foster care because of physical abuse and neglect, and about half of these children are victims of sexually abu-

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sive experiences. Because sexually abusive experiences are frequently not discovered until after placement, the above percentage is a conservative estimate (AFCR, personal conversation, 1990).

Review of the Literature

There is no known list of factors which adequately predict the removal of maltreated children from their biological families. What constitutes parental neglect in one study may be regarded as a conflict in the parent-child relationship elsewhere. However, some factors leading to foster placement include: financial hardship within the family; the abandonment of young children; substance abuse; and an insufficient support network for parents at stressful times (McFadden, 1985; Stein, 1987). Recently, researchers have begun emphasizing that sexually abused children are more likely to be placed out of the home than other categories of abused children. Others have concluded that it is the severity of the abuse which significantly increases out of home placement rather than any specific type of abuse (Runyan, Gould, Frost and Loda, 1982).

Foster care programs are part of the child welfare services that are available in all states. The law strongly supports the maintenance of the unity of the abused children's family by emphasizing prevention, reunification and permanency planning. To a lesser degree the law supports the development of services for foster parents such as training in child management (Stein, 1987). We believe the need to train foster parents of sexually abused children is critical and it is therefore the focus of this paper.

First, the number of sexually abused children needing foster care is increasing and taxing the established system. Second, recent research indicates that sexually abused children often manifest a wide range of complex emotional and behavioral difficulties that are difficult to handle and require specialized training of caregivers. These symptoms include: depression, fear, anger and anxiety disorders (Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Roberts, 1986). These children may also become withdrawn and isolated, display eating and/or sleeping disorders, act aggressively, attempt to disassociate themselves from the experience, and/or act out sexually (Gil, 1987). They may manifest symptoms such as reexperience of the trauma, avoidant behaviors and hyperarousal which are consistent with the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (McLeer, Deblinger, Atkins, Foa & Ralphe, 1988).

Specialized training to develop a high level of skills is required when caring for these children. However, although some caregivers