

Center for Health & Safety Culture

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2019 Montana Foster Parent Survey Key Findings Report

Prepared for the

Montana State Department of Public Health and Human Services

Addictive and Mental Disorders Division

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Social and Emotional Competencies of Foster Parents

The survey measured the social and emotional competencies of foster parents in five skill areas. The ratings of their own skills are divided into three groups – low, moderate, and high skill levels. The ratings for each skill area are averaged for an overall measure.

As shown in the chart below (Figure 3), more foster parents rate themselves as highly skilled in social awareness and relationship skills than other skills. Some foster parents rate themselves as having low skill levels in self-awareness and self-management skills.

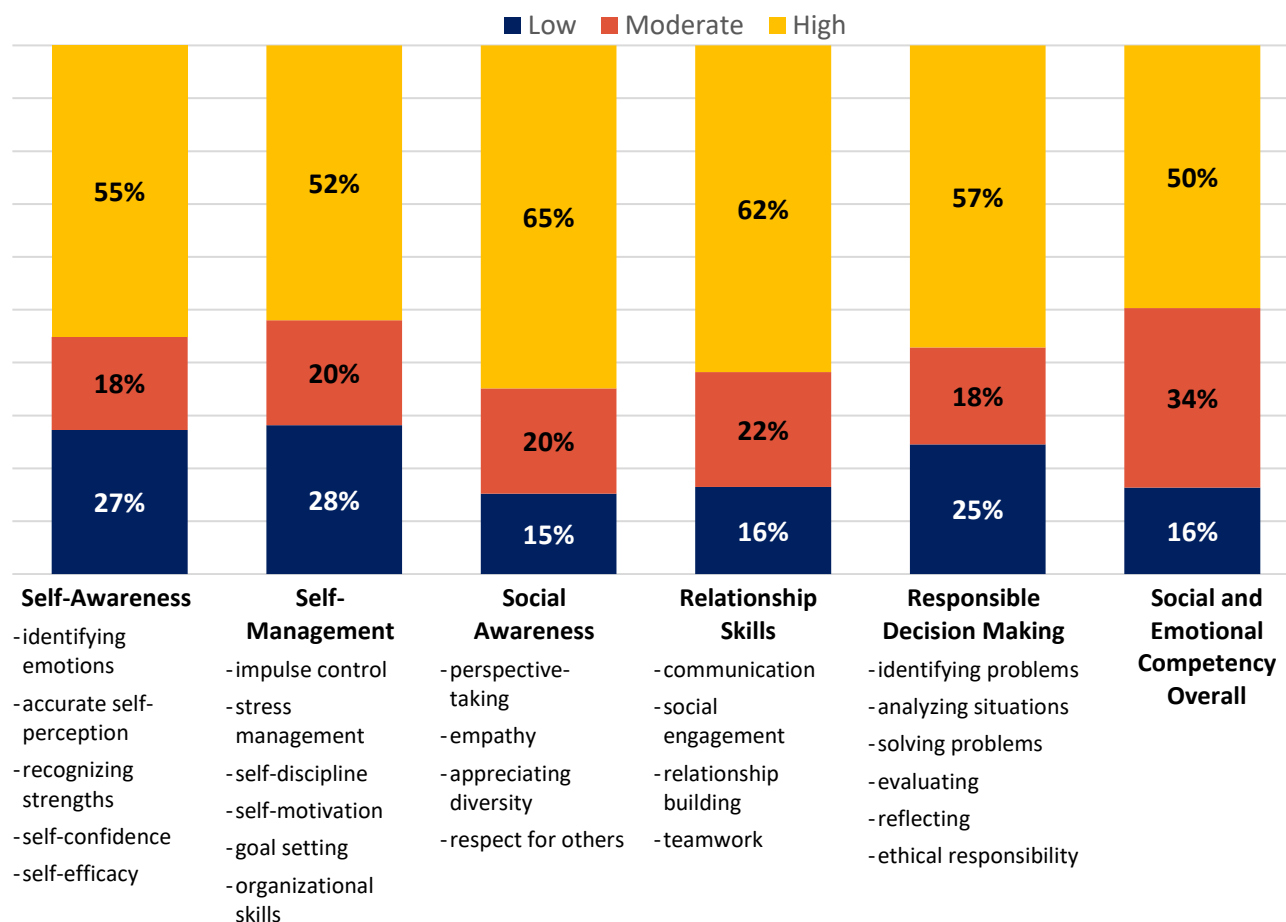


Figure 3. Social and Emotional Competency of Foster Parents

Reasons for Choosing to Become a Foster Parent

The survey asked foster parents why they chose to become a foster parent. Figure 4 presents a word cloud of their responses.

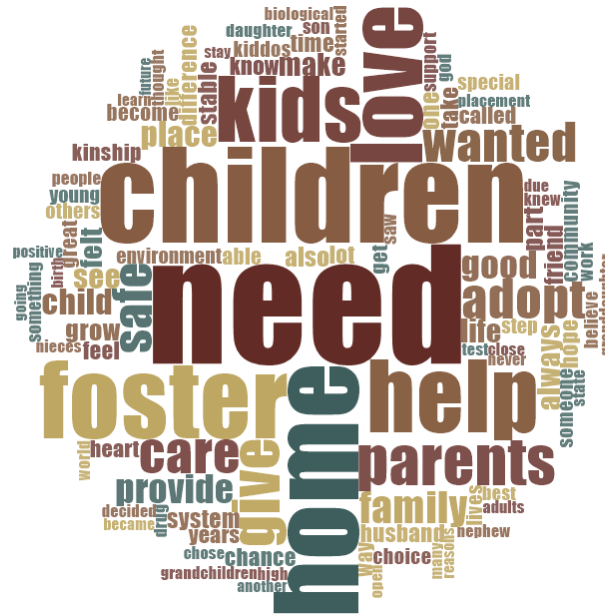


Figure 4. Word Cloud of Reasons Why People Chose to Become a Foster Parent

Further analysis revealed:

- The most frequently occurring reason people listed that they chose to take in children in foster care was that they recognized the great need for foster parents in their community, and they were responding to that need.
- Many parents of children in foster care reported that they felt they had love, a structured home life, safety, and opportunities for a good life to offer children in the foster system.
- Some parents' reasons for fostering were based on their overall love of children or their concern and compassion for children. Others stated more altruistic reasons that led them to fostering – "giving a voice to the voiceless," having a heart for service, and wanting to give back to their community.
- A few people noted their experience in working with children with special needs and/or high needs, so taking in such children was a way they could help meet that specific need in their community. Some parents who foster were particularly interested in taking in infants and did so to fill their own personal affinity for infants.
- Some empty nesters who were not quite ready to have child-free households or younger couples and single adults who did not have children of their own chose fostering to bring children into their homes and either become or remain parent figures. Some were not

biologically able to have their own children, and the foster system provided an opportunity to parent and perhaps even a path to adoption. Some people thrived in large families and enjoyed bringing additional children into their homes. Others felt that since they had raised successful children of their own that taking in children in need to give them the same opportunity was a gift they could give. Several parents mentioned the benefits their own biological children had received from taking in children/siblings in the foster system, and how they became foster families to help their own children become better people.

- Many people became parents to a child in the foster system to take in a family member, a friend or acquaintance's child, or a child they knew of from some other personal connection (student, patient, clients, etc.). Some became foster parents because they knew other families who fostered and were inspired by them.
- A few people stated that their reason for being a foster parent was simply fulfilling their general want to be a foster parent, and some noted that they do it because it is personally rewarding. Some said they felt they had a calling to be a foster parent and of those a few noted that calling was a religious one.
- Another reason some people chose to become parents to children in foster care is that they were former children in the foster care system themselves who had tumultuous childhoods and felt strongly about giving better opportunities to current children in the system. A few shared strong concern for teens in the system and specifically became foster parents to take in teens.

Fears and Concerns About Becoming a Foster Parent

The survey asked foster parents about their fears and concerns when they decided to become a foster parent. Further analysis revealed:

- The most common fear shared by parents of children in the foster system was not being good enough, strong enough, or prepared enough to handle the changes necessary to successfully accommodate taking in a child. Some parents feared being too exhausted or overwhelmed to be able to handle all the new logistics. A few simply feared losing their personal free time.
- Another highly recurring fear of parents taking in children in the foster system had to do with anticipating attachment to the children and how heartbreaking letting them go would be eventually. Their fears surrounding attachment had to do with enduring the eventual loss of the child from their household but also the possibility that the child may be going back to a household that was unhealthy or unsafe.
- Many parents feared that they wouldn't be able to handle all of the potential (and unknown) behaviors, issues, disorders, or trauma that their child in foster care may have. Some parents feared the mental, emotional, and welfare problems they may encounter with their child. A common fear from parents was not being capable of meeting the diverse needs of the children

in foster care that come to them and potentially causing them more harm. Several were concerned about their capacity to break the cycle of bad behaviors and troubling issues for the children they take in.

- A common concern for foster parents who had their own biological children already in the home was the effects that bringing a child in foster care into the home will have on them. There was concern over balancing the role of parent to the biological children and the children from foster care as well as other roles parents have to play. Some parents also shared concern for what the situation would do to their marriages and relationships with extended family. A few noted they feared potential violence, conflict, or harm that may come into the home as a result of bringing in a child in the foster system. There is always a chance that the child is not comfortable or does not accept the new household, and the child may come from some tough circumstances that affect the way they interact and assimilate into the household. Fear of not being a good fit or match was voiced by a few parents.
- Another major concern for some foster parents was the complications that come from dealing with “the system.” Whether the state, the legal system, the biological family, the case workers, etc., the foster care system can carry a lot of frustration for those involved. Similarly, another concern of parents was not having the financial resources and funding to adequately support and care for their children in foster care.
- Some feared they were getting too old to be foster parents and to be able to meet the needs of the children. Others worried they may not love the children in foster care as much as their own biological children. Some doubted their abilities to parent because they had never had children of their own before and fostering would be their first attempt at parenting. A few voiced concerns over how their lives would change and that those changes could be detrimental.

Prioritization of Topics by Parents

The survey asked foster parents to rank 56 parenting topics based on what they were most interested in learning. The following list includes those ranked in the top third.

- Teaching how to deal with anxiety (like how to seek help and manage it)
- Challenging behaviors: Disrespect
- How to help children to be more responsible
- How to help children to be more compassionate
- Childhood trauma (how to deal with trauma, seeking help, managing, things that trigger)
- How to help children to be more independent
- Eating/food concerns like hoarding, overeating, trauma, healthy eating habits/nutrition, grazing/snacks, picky eating, etc.
- How to help children to be more loving
- How to help children to be more confident
- An issue just happened, and now what do I do? Next steps... (“I can’t believe they just did that, now what?” like risky behaviors, bullying, etc.)
- How to help children to be more empathetic
- How to help children to be more fulfilled
- Challenging behaviors: Defiance
- Challenging behaviors: Power struggles
- Helping a child respond to failure
- Challenging behaviors: Aggressive or violent
- Teaching a child to ask for what they need (like with a teacher at school or a caseworker or in court)
- Picking up and understanding a child’s cues
- Hygiene (developing healthy habits like covering your mouth when you cough or regularly bathing as a teen)
- Challenging behaviors: Swearing

Conversation Guide

Engaging in constructive dialogue about these results has the potential to improve outcomes in your community by revealing new understanding and opportunities.

Getting Ready for Constructive Dialogue¹

Otto Scharmer, in his research on organizational and community change, recognized the importance of preparing ourselves to learn from new information. He calls this “Quieting the Voices.” He noted three voices that can inhibit us from learning and engaging in constructive dialogue: the voice of judgement, the voice of cynicism, and the voice of fear. We encourage you to intentionally reflect on how you respond to the results shared in this report and how these voices may be getting in the way of you seeing and learning new information.

We encourage you to acknowledge these voices and try to “quiet” them as you engage in dialogue about these results.

Questions to Foster Constructive Dialogue²

Questions to Reveal Deeper Insights

- What surprised you?
- What challenged you?
- What encouraged you?
- What has had real meaning for you from what you have seen in the data?
- What has been your major learning, insight, or discovery so far from these data?

Questions to Focus Collective Attention

- How do these results challenge our current approaches?
- What opportunities can you see that the data are revealing?

Questions to Create Forward Movement

- What is possible here?
- What will it take to create change?
- What needs our immediate attention going forward?
- What do we still need to learn about this issue?

¹ Scharmer, C. O. (2009). *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (1st edition). San Francisco, Calif: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

² Adapted from Brown, J., Isaacs, D., Community, W. C., Senge, P., & Wheatley, M. J. (2005). *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* (1 edition). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.



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