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Waterloo Lutheran University Graduate School of Social Work

COUNSELLING FOSTER PARENTS

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Airdrie Thompson

April, 1968

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COUNSELLING FOSTER PARENTS

I INTRODUCTION:

My interest in this topic is the result of having been a foster parent for a period of one year for a group home for emotionally disturbed teenage boys. When my husband and I undertook this project, we had been married for two years and had one daughter of a year old. The five boys we had during this period ranged in age from eleven to fourteen years. This in itself was a phenomenal adjustment to our way of life. A couple grows with its family, passing through the various stages of development, moving gradually from one experience to the next. In our case, we jumped across a span of ten years from our own child to our youngest foster child, missing that gradual transition of adjustment.

Because I had had earlier experience as a caseworker, we were afforded the enriching experience of consistent psychiatric consultation and evaluation. This direction was a most helpful experience because each week seemed to bring some sort of a crisis to be dealt with.

Today, more and more children coming in to care appear to be suffering from emotional maladjustment. Perhaps we are aware of this only because we are learning more about foster children and the impact of their separation from their families. Perhaps emotional illness is in fact on the increase. In any event this is a problem which faces many, many foster families today and it is one which we must face realistically. It is my belief that it is important to at least offer foster parents some help in adjusting to their new way of life for not only does the foster child have to be helped to fit into the new surroundings but the foster parents and their own children need assistance in accepting what is bound to be a somewhat different family atmosphere. There may be some, who, when offered these services, will not be able to accept them or who will not realistically need them, but I feel they should be available, and that we would find a significant portion of the foster population who would benefit by such counselling.

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II LITERATURE REVIEW

Although various aspects of foster home care are thoroughly discussed in the literature, very little has been written about individual counselling for foster parents. However, one foster mother, Susan Barkley, voiced her concern for the need for counselling for reasons similar to my own.¹ Again, she had experienced child care from both the practical and theoretical aspects and was able to vividly envision the significance of such a program.

Let us first consider the foster child, who he is, and what foster family care can give to him.

Youngsters, who for many different reasons cannot be cared for by their own parents, in their own homes, are today being cared for by foster parents. A publication of the Child Welfare League of America states that:

"Foster family care offers the child who otherwise lacks adequate parental care and who cannot remain in his own home, a closer approximation of normal family living than other types of substitute care, and is particularly adapted to meet the child's normal developmental needs in a family centred society."²

Marcia Gedanken observes that:

"The child is placed with the foster parent for a corrective parenting experience which in itself is treatment. Dynamically, the foster parents establish a positive relationship with the child so that the

- 3 -

^{1.} Susan Barkley, "New Kinds of Foster Parenting," <u>Ontario</u> <u>Association of Children's Aid Societies Journal</u>, XI (February 1968) p. 5.

^{2.} Child Welfare League of America, <u>Standards for Foster Family</u> <u>Care Service</u>, New York: Child Welfare League of America (1959) p. 6.

child identifies with them, and through this identification the child will grow and change."³

She goes on to say that:

"Foster parents' giving, demands and corrections are based on an understanding -- in common with the social worker -- of the causes of the child's problems, his present stage of development, and his willingness and ability to meet new demands. In a word, timing is geared to the child's needs."⁴

This is indeed a heavy demand to place upon a family, for their own needs must be meshed into those of the child's. Part of the difficulty seems to be the confusion with which we perceive the foster parent. What is his role?

Esther Glickman defines it in the following way:

"The working relationship with a foster parent is not just like that with a client, nor is it exactly like that with a colleague. It does, however, bear a rather strong resemblance to the relationship between supervision and the student social worker, or later, experienced worker.... The worker and the foster parent, who is sometimes regarded as a professional team.... As at all times within an agency structure the supervisor is administratively responsible for the student's or the worker's professional activities, so does the agency worker carry an over-all constant responsibility for the foster family's care of the child."⁵

Jean Charnley, on the other hand, considers foster parents as "staff members" who "share with the social worker the job of rehabilitating children." However, she goes on to say:

3. Marcia T. Gedanken, "Foster Parent and Social Worker Roles Based on Dynamics of Foster Parenting," <u>Child Welfare</u> XLV, (November 1966) p. 513.

4. ibid p. 513.

5. Esther Glickman, <u>Child Placement through Clinically Oriented</u> <u>Casework</u>, New York, (1957) p. 201-2. "Sometimes, as the problems arise in their new role press in upon them heavily, foster parents 'act like clients' and the social worker responds to them as she does to any person in need who is asking for help."⁶

Others observe the foster parent as a relative, a stepparent, a professional parent or a student parent. It is important to define with him exactly what his function is and how we expect him to serve the agency.

Foster parents have been said to be special people who have a little more of the common qualities than other people have. We require them to love and care for a child that is not theirs, giving generously of time, energy and themselves to provide for the needs of the child. Despite the difficulties and the uncertain length of stay in the home, the foster family must develop an understanding of various problems and a tolerance for natural parental and agency intervention. Regardless of whether we see these people as our colleagues or our subordinates, they are an extension of the agency providing a service to children who need a home.

We know that job satisfaction is the route to greater productivity and foster parents, more than anyone else, need to be satisfied, since their job lasts twenty-four hours a day. The monetary benefits are low and therefore personal satisfaction, identification, communication and recognition

- 5 -

^{6.} Jean Charnley, <u>The Art of Child Placement</u>, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, (1955) p. 151.

are important. They must be helped to talk about the many incidents they encounter.

In discussing interviewing style with the foster parent, Nadal points out that:

"In the collaborative relationship in the placement situation, the foster parents' ability to communicate important feelings and attitudes and the worker's methods of eliciting and responding to such feelings and attitudes are important conditions. These communications are important because they reveal the child's adjustment and the foster parents' response -the content of the placement situation. Equally important they reveal the effect that the child has in evoking deeper feelings and attitudes of the foster parent, which unless aired, clarified and placed in the proper perspective, may interfere with placement."⁷

Since the worker's relationship with foster parents is the medium by which placement is maintained, verbal communication about the foster parents' attitudes and feelings may avoid frequent replacement of the child. Since the foster families' own life plans and accidents influence placement and sometimes cause termination, it is necessary not only to be supportive but to deal directly and realistically with the source of the problem. How can we do this? Gordon Allport aptly points out:

"If we want to know how people feel: what they experience and what they remember, what their emotions and motives are like and the reasons for acting as they do -- why not ask them."⁸

7. Robert M. Nadal, "Interviewing Style and Foster Parents' Verbal Accessibility," <u>Child Welfare</u>, XLVI, (April 1967) p. 207.

8. Gordon W. Allport, "The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science," <u>Bullitan 49</u>, Social Science Research Council, (1942). Group education, stimulation and evaluation has proven to be most successful and enlightening. Soffen found that group educational programs supplement and reinforce services of the caseworkers to the extent that:

"In his relationship with a professional worker whose education is likely to be superior and with an impersonal agency whose policies may seem bureaucratic and arbitrary, the foster parent needs constant reassurance that he is important and that his crisisridden work is appreciated. An invitation to participate in an educational program says to the foster parent that the agency does care. Such a program therefore has a further objective, which is to give status and recognition to foster parents and to help build and maintain morale."⁹

Without disregarding the value of the group experience, it should be pointed out that the experience of each foster family although in many ways the same as other foster families, is also unique. For this reason, the individual session would serve to fill the gap which cannot be served in the group. However, a further look at group experience will help to point out what the individual counselling session may also achieve.

Soffen further showed that demonstrated impact was achieved in areas that were actually taught. Foster parents can and do change.

"Caseworkers saw the parents in a new status-giving role -- as dedicated learners attending classes regularly and voluntarily struggling to master difficult concepts essential for good child care. The improved self-image to the caseworker cannot help but improve the climate necessary for the quality of their joint effort -- an outcome so earnestly desired for the improvement of foster family care." 10

9. Joseph Soffen, "The Impact of a Group Educational Program for Foster Parents," <u>Child Welfare</u>, XLI, (May 1962) p. 197.

10. ibid p. 201.

In noting the impact of a group educational program he pointed out six changeable characteristics in foster families.

- 1. the relationship to agency and to caseworker.
- Understanding of the growth needs of children and skill in dealing with these needs.
- 3. Understanding of the meaning of behavior including antisocial behavior and skill in dealing with children's behavioral expression.
- 4. motivation for undertaking foster parenting responsibility.
- 5. psychological -- emotional climate in the family.
- 6. Understanding of the meaning natural parents have for their children and knowledge of how to relate approximately to the natural parents.¹¹

This group program could be readily applicable in individual cases where specific problems might not be suitably dealt with in a group.

The guidance must be flexible and must not be an attack on foster parents. Many examples in the literature point out that foster homes selected need not be problem free. In fact it appears that many of these homes which have had to face and resolve serious difficulties before the fostering experience, are better equipped to deal with new stresses and to accept the competence and skill of a social worker in working together towards new or alternate methods of coping with stress.

11. ibid p. 196

Gedanken has attempted to interpret the se "worker's role with the foster parents under the following eleven points.

- 1. supervision
- 2. support
- 3. promotion of identification
- 4. threat of natural parent
- 5. child's resistance to casework relationship
- interpreting the caseworker's role with the child to the foster parent.
- 7. removal by foster jurents of prohibition concerning the caseworker.
- 8. resolution of conflict in methods between the social worker and the foster parents (including anxious, guilty or angry feelings.)
- 9. foster parents' conviction of their worth to the child.
- encouraging positive interaction between foster parents and natural parents.
- 11. protection of foster parents against hurt by supporting other primary relationships.¹²

Worthy as this list is, it is seldom feasible for the worker to cover all these issues during his regular monthly or bi-monthly visit when the bulk of this time is focused on the child rather than the special personal needs of the foster parent. With this placement goal of improved relations between the child and his own family, some serious general problems are encountered. It is often very difficult for foster families to look at their own feelings and reactions even though they may want to. Moreover it is often extremely difficult to voice negative criticism against the agency. By the same token it is difficult to handle with the foster parents any negative ciriticism offered by the child in confidence. There is sometimes a need of foster parents to succeed too quickly and they have to be helped to see that damage incurred over a period of many years may take several more years to be repaired. There may be a conflict of values between foster parents, children, and social worker and these have to be studied and acknowledged. When these issues are acknowledged many caseworkers are incapable of coping with them because of lack of experience or a burdonsome caseload.

Just as other areas of life such as marriage and natural parenthood sometimes require guidance and counselling, so the foster parent may need such services to enable him to continue his work in an understanding and progressive way. This is an exploratory study. If individual, professional counselling services are provided for foster parents on a regular basis, their capacity to carry out the foster parent role will be increased.

Concepts

Individual, professional counselling services

For the purpose of this study these services should consist of meetings between individual foster couples and a skilled social worker. (In practice the counsellor could be a psychiatrist or other qualified psychotherapist.) Each session should last approximately one hour during which time the emotional adjustment of the foster child and the emotional adjustment of all members of the foster family would be among the topics discussed. Physical and maturational development could also be discussed.

<u>Regular basis</u>

The above sessions should be held on a regular basis every second week as opposed to irregular meetings only when specific help is requested.

Foster parent role

For this study, the foster parent role should be considered to be that role which has as its aim the establishment of a positive, normal relationship between the child and the foster parents.

Variables

The <u>independent</u> variable will be the presence or lack of counselling services.

The <u>dependent</u> variable will be the capacity to perform the foster parent role.

There will also be a number of other possible variables which, if not controlled, could affect the results of the study. These variables deal with the differences in the background of the various foster families and foster children. Sociological factors that might affect the performance would include the age of each parent; education of each parent; size of the foster family including own children and other foster children; age of own children in relation to the foster child; religion; ethnic background; the number of years experience as foster parents; the economic situation of the family; the length of marriage; and the occupational level of the foster parents.

A major psychological factor affecting the foster parents would be their motivation for taking foster children. Irene Josselyn lists eleven possible motives including a wish to help a child in need; a wish to fulfill their own needs for a child; or a desire to supplement the family income.¹³ It would seem

13. Irene Josselyn, "Evaluating Motives of Foster Parents," Child Welfare, XXXI (February 1952) reprint. obvious that sets of parents with similar sociological backgrounds, differing in motivation could be expected to produce differing degrees of achievement in the foster parent role.

These variables influencing foster children would not seem to be as important to the results of this study as those influencing foster parents in that the dependent variable deals with the performance of the parents rather than the children. However, three factors do seem sufficiently important to note. These are age; sex; and emotional stability of the child. Any severe overbalancing of one of the groups in regard to any of these three factors could cast doubt on the validity of this study. (See Appendix A)

IV METHOD

This study consists of testing the performance of foster parents before and after a substantial period of counselling and comparing any change in the performance level to that of a control group that was not given counselling.

Major Considerations

Establishment of experimental group and control group so as to minimize the effect of descriptive variables.

Our problem here is to select two groups of foster parents so alike that the effect of the descriptive variables listed in section III will be controlled for.

To do this we interview approximately seventy sets of foster parents each with at least one foster child five years or older. (Foster children under five years would not be suitable subjects for the testing procedures to be used later.) In this interview the foster parents are requested to complete the information data form. (See Appendix A) Using this data, and the process of matching, two groups of twenty-five families each can be assembled so that the two groups will have similar profiles for each of the descriptive variables.

2. Counselling Procedures

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Counselling, as outlined earlier under "concepts," will be given to the foster parents in the experimental group only for a six month period. It is important that neither group realize that they are part of an experiment that is rating their performance as such knowledge could provide motivation that would affect their performance. It is also important that the control group not be aware of the counselling being given the test group since the feeling of being excluded could also affect their performance.

3. <u>Method of Making Quantitative Evaluation of Foster Parent</u> <u>Performance</u>.

Since the performance of the foster parent is directed towards establishing a therapeutic relationship with the foster child, it follows that a test of the child's attitude towards the foster parent would be an indicator of the performance of the foster parent. This is not to say that the performance is reflected in the attitude itself, but rather in the degree of change in attitude. (Excellent foster parents may have children placed with them who have extremely negative attitudes while less proficient foster parents could possibly have children placed with them who show more positive attitudes. The attitudes of the foster children then do not reflect the proficiency of the foster parent. However we would expect that over a period of time the children placed with excellent foster parents would make greater progress than would children with less proficient foster parents. That is, the degree of change of attitude rather than the attitude itself is the indicator of the degree of proficiency of the foster parent. It is important too, to always be aware of the child's

- 15 -

emotional adjustment and the degree of need for improvement since the healthier the child, the less need there is for improvement.)

Therefore, what we are after is a method of measuring quantitatively the degree of change in the child's attitude toward his foster parents and the entire foster family environment.

One method of testing attitudes that is well proven and seems applicable to this project, would be Osgood's <u>Semantic</u> <u>Differential Measurement</u>.¹⁴ This would involve asking the child to rate each of ten concepts that would apply to the foster home situation, according to a seven point scale, lying between pairs of polar adjectives. The ten foster home concepts include mealtime; clothes; foster father; playtime; household chores; foster family; bedtime; Saturday; foster mother; and toys.

The polar adjectives are good-bad; sad-happy; importantunimportant; beautiful-ugly; and stupid-wise. (See Appendix C)

The instructions to the child are clearly stated on a form which accompanies the test. (See Appendix B) The concept may be indicated with an x for older children.

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¹⁴ Charles E. Osgood, George J. Suci, and Percy H. Tannenbaum, <u>The Measurement of Meaning</u>, University of Illinois Press, Urbana (1957) p. 81.

Perhaps for younger children a series of stick figures would be more appropriate.

The scale would be graduated from +3 to -3 indicating extremely positive, -3 indicating extremely negative. However, the concepts are not consistently positive on the left and negative on the right to guard against a repetitive unthinking pattern on the part of the child. Positive values would be given to that side of the scale which indicates satisfactory adjustment on behalf of the foster child. Negative values would be given to that side of the scale which indicates an unsatisfactory adjustment on behalf of the foster child. (See Appendix D)

The test, once established, should be sent to a panel of experts in the field of psychological testing for verification of its applicability. Following this, it should be given to a group of foster children outside of the two test groups but of the same age range of those used in the actual project. Any problems of interpretation or ambiguity that might arise could thus be corrected before the research actually begins.

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V TESTING PROCEDURE (application)

The test is given to the foster children of both groups at the onset of the project. All testing will be done at the agency and the child will be assured that his answers will remain individually confidential.

Since the groups were established mainly on the basis of the sociological and psychological characteristics of the foster parents rather than the foster children, it is entirely possible that the collective attitudes of the children in each group could be quite different between the two groups. This need cause no alarm to the experimenter since what we are really measuring is not attitude but change in attitude.

Following a six month interval during which time no regular counselling is given to either group, the children are retested and any change in attitude is recorded. This will give an indication of the normal rate of change for each group without counselling. (If in the initial formulation of the test and control groups we were successful in obtaining two groups of equally proficient foster parents then we could expect an equal degree of change in the attitudes of the foster children in the two groups. However, somewhat different degrees of change between the two groups need not alarm us as all we are interested in is establishing a norm for each group.)

Another six month period is allowed during which time the test group is given the individual professional counselling

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on a regular basis. The control group carries on as in the initial six month period. At the end of the second six month period, the children in both groups are tested for a third time and the change in attitude for the second six months is recorded. What we are interested in is the change of attitude in the second six months as compared to the first six months. In the control group it would be expected that the amount of change in the second six months would be approximately equal to that in the first period. (Any increase or decrease in the degree of change would be due to the maturation process.)

In the experimental group, any substantial difference in the degree of change in the second as compared to the first period (more than that of the maturational process as indicated by the control group) would be due to counselling.

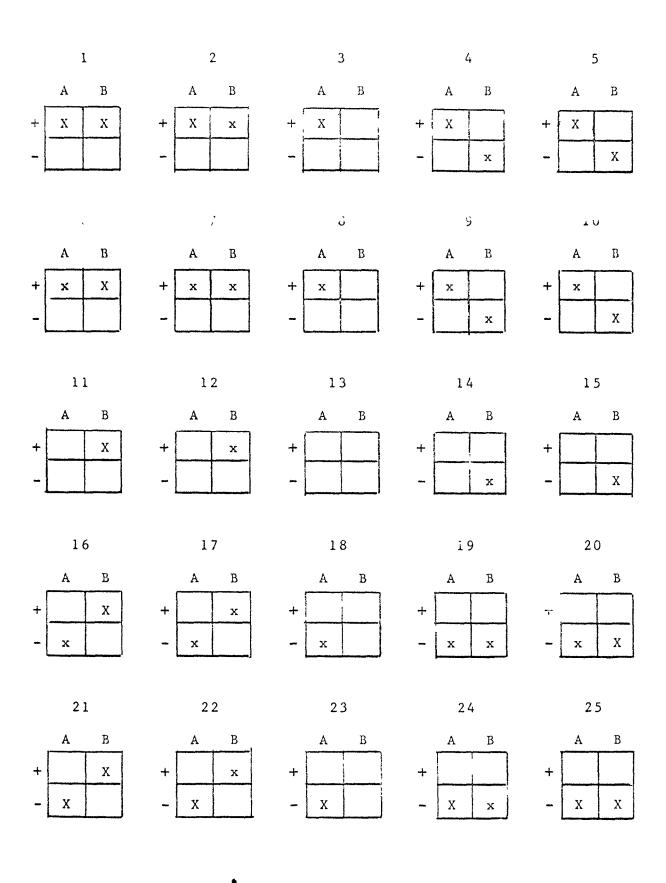
If the difference in the degree of change of attitude in the second six month period is plotted graphically for both groups (Table I) it can be seen that there are no less than twenty-five possible permutations and combinations.

Strongly positive differences in the degree of change of attitude for the experimental group as compared to the control group (cases 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 14, 15 and 20 in Table I) would tend to support the hypothesis as stated.

Strongly negative differences in the degree of change of attitude for the experimental group as compared to the control group (cases 6, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 21, 22, 23 and 24 in Table I) would tend to negate the hypothesis.

No substantial differences in the degree of change of attitude for the two groups (cases 1, 7, 13, 19 and 25 in

TABLE I



A = Results from the experimental group

- B = Results from the control group

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- = A more negative (or less positive) change of attitude during 2nd 6 month period of testing

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- X represents a substantial difference in the degree of change during the 2nd 6 month period
- x represents a relatively smaller difference in the degree of change in the 2nd 6 month period

Neither x nor X represents no significant difference in the degree of change in the second period.

Table I) would tend to indicate that the counselling had no significant effect on the performance of the foster parents. What can the agency do with this?

Since most agency workers carry caseloads which exceed the preferable number, it would be best for the agency to hire an additional professional social worker. This person could administer the tests and give individual counselling to the foster parents in the experimental group. If this research program has a positive outcome, several additional workers would be required, according to the size of the agency and number of foster parents. Although the financial outlay for additional staff might seem unrealistic, the administrator would hopefully convince the board that in the long run, money would be saved if each foster child's adjustment could be improved.

Theoretical implications for a strongly positive attitude would indicate that the agency relationship with the foster parent does resemble the relationship between the supervisor and the student social worker, or later, the experienced worker. A positive result would, in fact, indicate the agency's responsibility to the foster parent to provide him with the counselling assistance so that the foster parent role might be strengthened and the foster child's experience enriched.

If negative differences, or no substantial differences are indicated in this research, then careful consideration

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should be given to ways and means of improving and broadening the foster relationship.

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APPENDIX A

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Foster Family Information Forms

Fost	er Father					
1.	Age 🔟 Under 30 🗂 30 - 39 🗂 40 and over					
2.	Education 🗍 did not 🗍 Complete 10 🗍 University complete but not Grade 10 matriculation					
Foster Mother						
3.	Age 🗍 Under 30 🔲 30 - 39 🗂 40 and over					
4.	Education 🗍 did not 🗍 Complete 10 🗍 University complete but not Grade 10 matriculation					
5.	Size of family: own children 1 2 3 4 more foster children 1 2 more 3 more					
6.	Age: own children 1. sex 1. 2. 2. 2. 3. 3. 3. 4. 4. 4. more more more					
	foster children 1. 2. 2. 2. 3. 3. 3. 3. more more more 1.					
7.	Religion: 🗍 Protestant 🗂 Jewish 🗍 Catholic					
	other none					
8.	Ethnic background: 🔲 Anglo-saxon 🗂 European 🗂 Other					

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9. Economic Situation:

Total Income □ Under \$4,000 5 \$4,000 to \$6,500 n Over \$6,500 10. Years Experience as foster parents ☐ Under 5 years ☐ 5 to 10 years n Over 10 years 11. Length of marriage: 🗍 Under 5 years 🗂 5 to 14 years □ 15 years and over 12. Occupationa: level [] blue collar 🗇 white collar 🗇 professional 13. Motivation for taking foster child(ren) wish to help child(ren) in need wish to have a child(ren) to supplement the family income □ other (specify) 1 Foster Child 14. Emotional adjustment (for each child) 1. n good 🗖 average D poor 2. 🗍 good 🗂 average D poor 3. 🗍 good 🗌 average n poor [] good 4 ,

- 🗍 average
 - 🗀 poor

APPENDIX B

Instructions to child:

The purpose of this study is to measure the meanings of certain things to you by having you place them between two opposites.

On the top of each page of this test you will find a word or idea. Below it you will find five pairs of opposite words, each pair separated by a scale consisting of seven dashes.

Here is how you use these scales.

If you feel that the idea at the top of the page is <u>very</u> <u>closely related</u> to one end of the scale, you should place your check-mark as follows:

fair ____; ___; ___; X_ unfair

If you feel that the idea is <u>quite closely related</u> to one or the other end of the scale (but not extremely), you should place your check-mark as follows:

strong ____; X_;____; weak

OR

strong ____; ___; ___; X; weak

If the idea seems <u>only slightly related</u> to one side as opposed to the other side (but is not really neutral), then you should check as follows: active ____; X; ___; passive OR

active ____; ___; X; ____; passive

The direction toward which you check, of course, depends upon which of the two ends of the scale seem most characteristic of the thing you're judging.

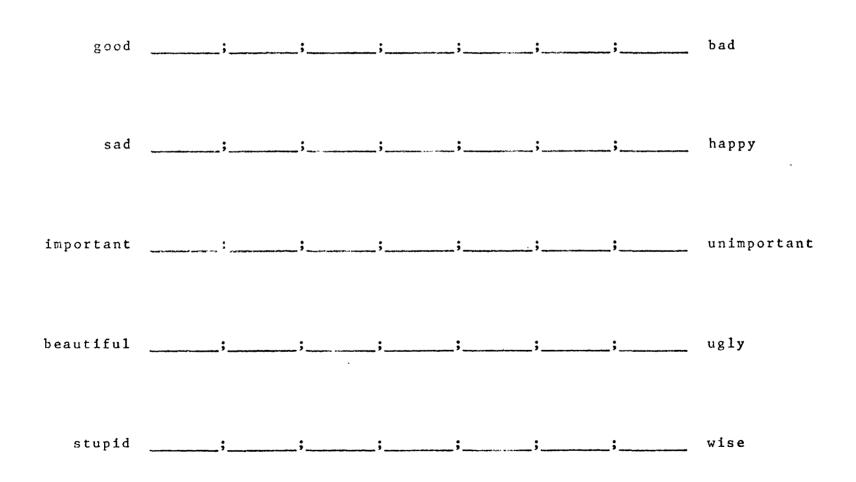
If you consider the idea to be <u>neutral</u> on the scale, both sides of the scale <u>equally associated</u> with the idea, or if the scale is <u>completely irrelevant</u>, unrelated to the idea, then you should place your check-mark in the middle space: safe ____;___;___;___;____;____ dangerous

IMPORTANT: (1) Place your check-marks <u>in the middle of</u> <u>spaces</u>, not on the boundaries:

this	not this
;	;¥

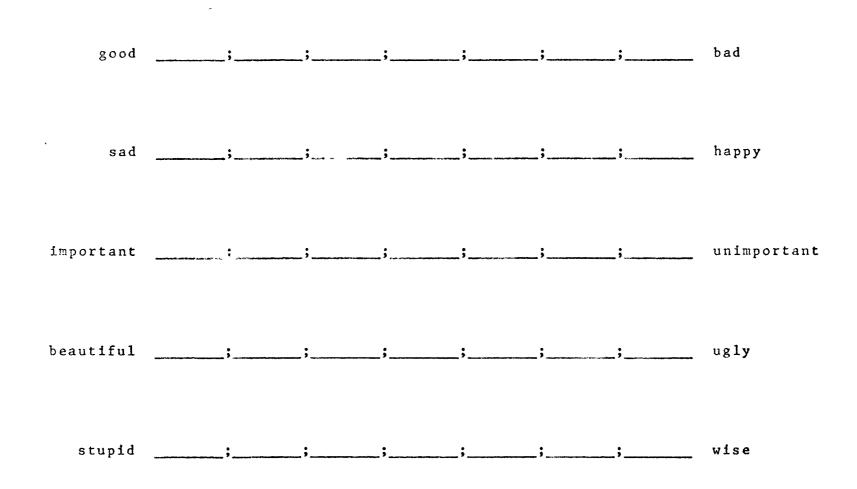
- (2) Be sure you check every scale for every idea -- <u>do not omit any</u>.
 - (3) Never put more than one check-mark on a single scale.

Sometimes you may feel as though you've had the same item before on the test. This will not be the case, so <u>do</u> <u>not look back and forth</u> through the items. Do not try to remember how you checked similar items earlier in the test. <u>Make each item a separate and independent judgment</u>. Work at fairly high speed through this test. Do not worry or puzzle over individual items. It is your first impressions, the immediate <u>feelings</u> about the items, that we want. On the other hand, please do not be careless, because we want your true impressions. MEALTIME



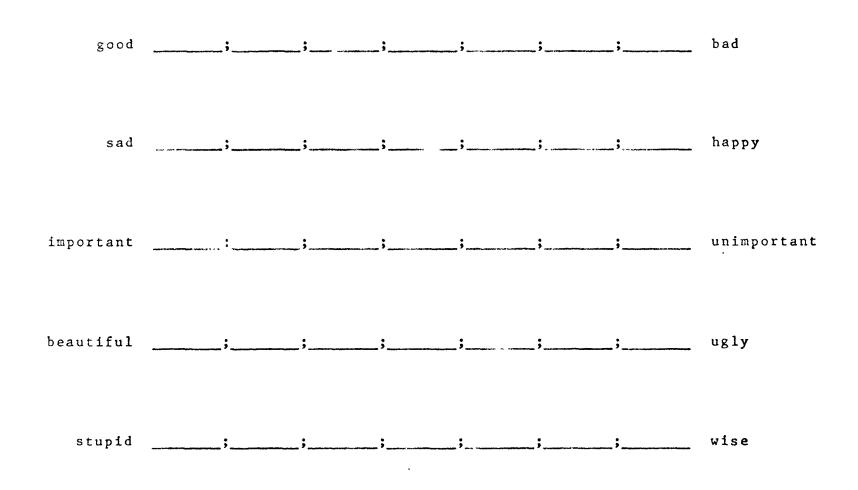
CLOTHES

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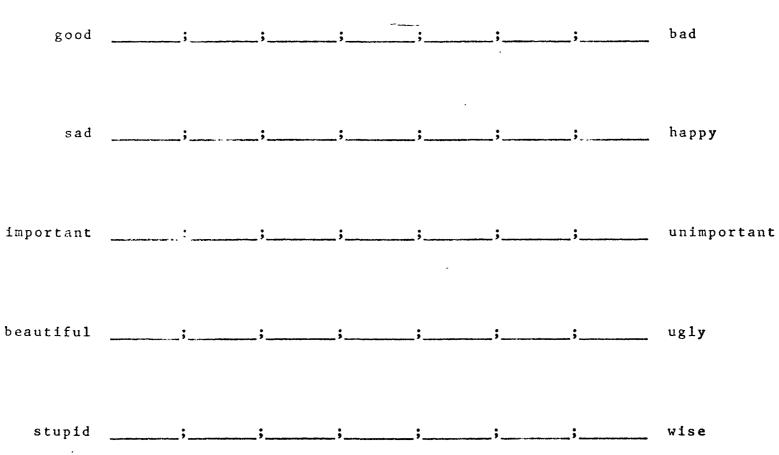


FOSTER FATHER

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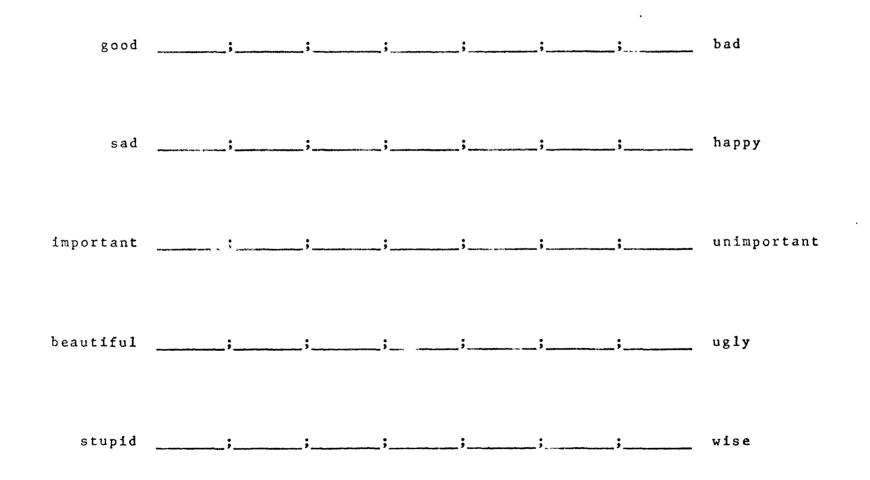


PLAYTIME

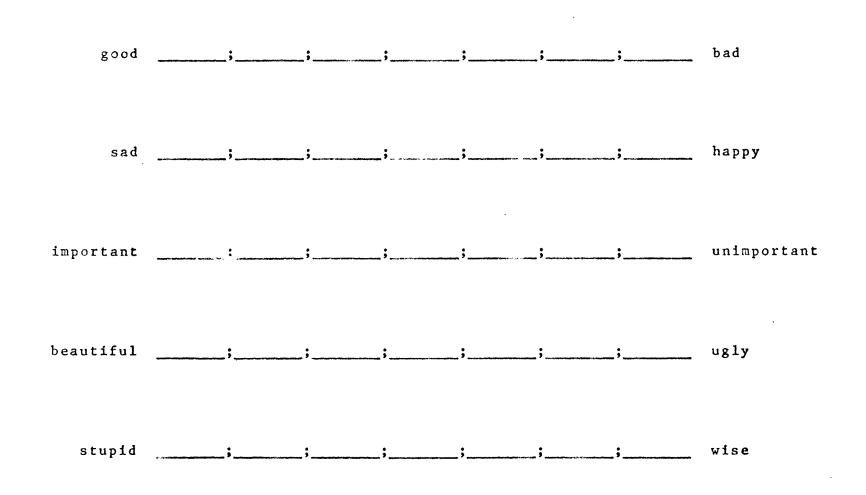


HOUSEHOLD CHORES

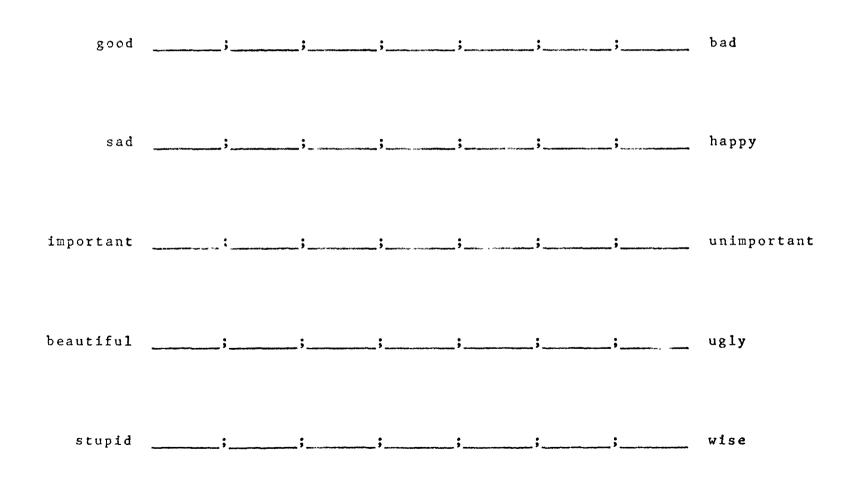
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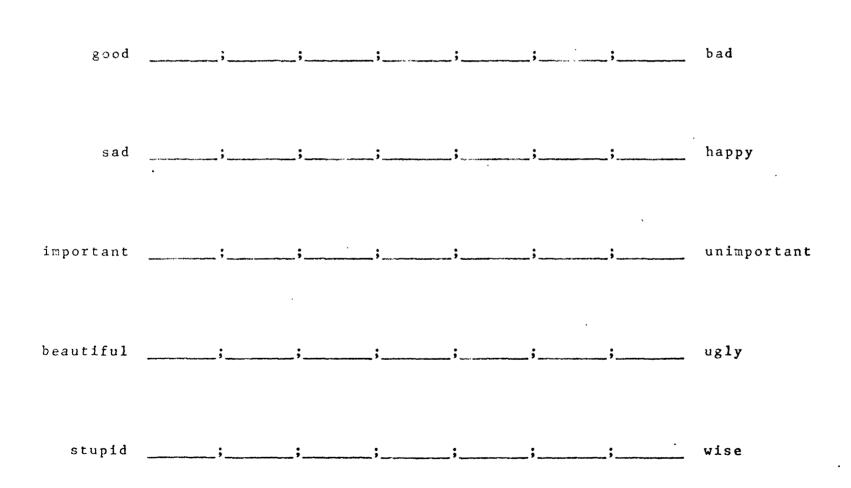
FOSTER FAMILY



SEDTIME



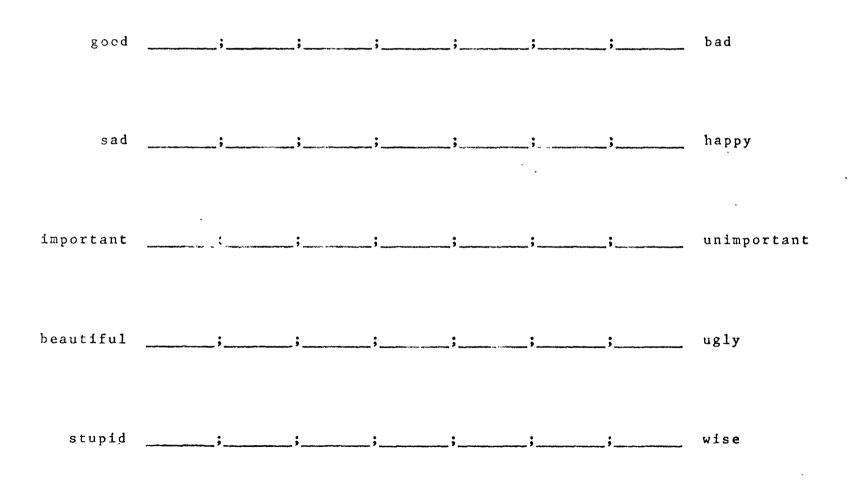
SATURDAY



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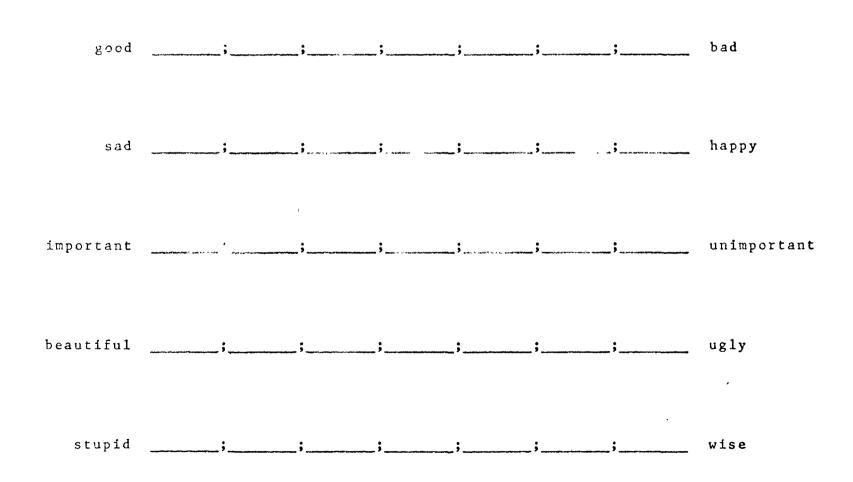
FOSTER MOTHER

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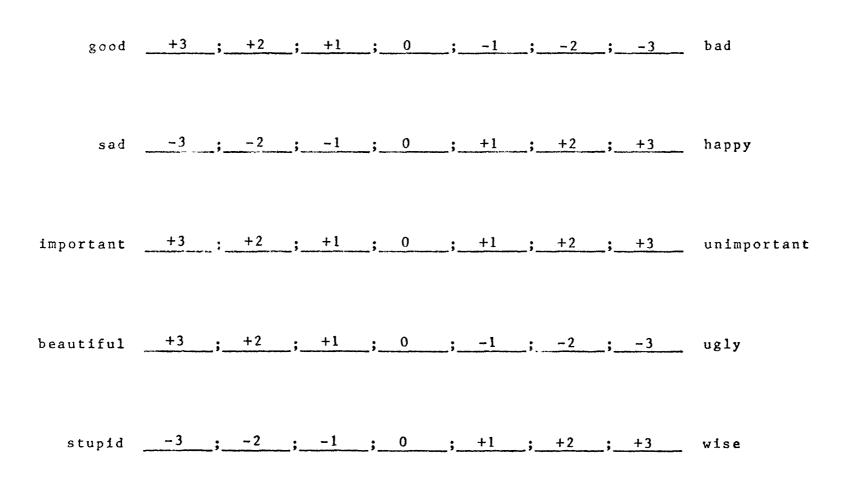
TOYS



APPENDIX D

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SCORING SHEET



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