

“Parents Who Are Not Supposed to Act Parental”: Foster Parenting and
Adoptive Parenting, 1950-1997

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In the post WWII years, women providing foster care served as “mothers” who were to supply the intangible qualities of love, and nurturance to children who were not their biological offspring. In this way, they were similar to adoptive parents. Yet as home workers, foster mothers provided social services for remuneration and signed contracts outlining the parameters of their relationship with their foster children. The goal of foster care was to replicate a “normal” family life for foster children as an alternative to institutional care or additional services to biological families. But because the ostensible goal of foster care was the return of children to their biological families, it was important that foster homes not perform the task of creating a substitute family life too well. To show “extreme love,” or “possessiveness” (as was expected of other kinds of parents) was to violate the standards of good foster parenting.¹ Indeed foster parents often signed contracts stating that they would not ever seek to adopt the children in their care. By the 1990s, however, some agencies were experimenting with “fost-adopt” placements in which some foster children were placed in homes of trained foster parents who were also cleared for possible adoption, signifying a dramatic shift in understandings of the role of foster parents.

Through an examination of the writings of child welfare professionals, child development experts, and case law, this paper will examine these changing understandings of the relationship of foster parents to adoption within the context of ongoing debates about the family and “good parenting.”

¹. Quoted in Sanford N. Katz, “Foster Parents versus Agencies: A Case Study in the Judicial Application of ‘The Best Interests of the Child’ Doctrine,” Michigan Law Review vol. 65 (Nov. 1966), 150.