

A COMPARISON OF VIEWS OF CHILDREN AND FOSTER PARENTS ON THE INTEGRATION OF A CHILD INTO A FAMILY

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Abstract

The Czech Republic has been repeatedly criticised for the large number of children who are being placed into institutional substitute family care. A solution, for which inspiration can be found e.g. in Scandinavian countries, is to increase the number of foster families, which would provide upbringing in a substitute family for children from a risky environment. However, it has to be a systemic process of preparing foster parents for this uneasy social mission. Important feedback is without doubt studies which are carried out in foster families.

Most surveys focus on the experiences of parents-fosterers with raising children in a substitute family. On the other hand, there is a nearly total lack of surveys which would reflect the opinions, experiences and possibly also the needs of the children themselves. This deficiency has been tackled by the authors of this text, which is dealing with the issues of integration of a child into a foster family, and where the experiences with integration of a child into a family were mapped by a qualitative research inquiry – both from the side of parents-fosterers and the children themselves. Knowledge resulting from a semi-structured interview supported by a family history, a drawing of the family and a pie chart of happiness and worries have been used for the final interpretation of the conclusions drawn from this research.

Key words: *family; foster care; integration of a child into a family; qualitative research*

INTRODUCTION

The situation of children placed in foster care is sometimes very complicated, which results from the actual conditions determined for foster care. As these are children who are not legally free, they have passed through various facilities within the framework of institutional care, i.e. from institutes for infants up to children's homes. The foster parent is only authorized to act on behalf of the child in common matters, which results in the fact that the main actor in important decisions is still the biological parent (Matějček

1999, p. 35). If the foster parent believes that a decision by the biological parent is not in accordance with the interests of the child, he has the right to take it to court (Plecitý et al. 2009, p. 81). Just based on this information, it is easy to imagine what problems a child in foster care may face. These are stressful situations, when the child can be exposed to not always desirable contact with biological parents, legal proceedings, and also the first contact with foster parents, learning more about the wider foster family etc. These are rather complicated events which may be hard to process psychologically

for the child. It is obvious from the available surveys and surveillance studies that we lack exploratory views of the children themselves, that is why we decided to investigate the given issue from this point of view. The research in particular focused on the way and degree of success of adaptation of a child to individual foster care.

Findings from selected studies

One of the pivotal field studies on the issue of foster care was published by I. Sobotková (2003), who used both a qualitative and quantitative approach in her study. The collection of data was carried out in the course of three years and included fifty families and several research methods (a semi-structured interview, the Family Environment Scale, FHI questionnaires, F-COPES, and the family history was not omitted either). The research focused mainly on the motives for foster care. According to the results, the main reason of foster parents was the desire to provide aid to an abandoned and helpless child, 30% of the respondents mentioned childlessness. In the case of women - foster mothers, the main purpose was a kind of “fulfilment of life” (Sobotková 2003, p. 51–53).

J. Koluchová (2003) devoted her thirty-year efforts to research focusing on the possibility of correction of deprivation in foster care. The research was of qualitative nature and regular visits to the family environment were also part of the whole survey. The results of this research show that the development of children diagnosed with deprivation was more fortunate than the original diagnosis. Here, an important role was played by a favourable situation in the substitute family and its proper care. Children, who were harassed or abused in their original families, suffered more often from phobias, *pavor nocturnus* (nightmares) and other sleep disturbances (Koluchová 2003).

M. Barnardová (2011) focused on drug addiction in the family. In this context, she writes that many children are neglected and subsequently placed in foster care due to the addiction of their parents. It results from interviews with children that only few of them perceived their placement in a substitute family as a welcome escape from the given situation (Barnardová 2011, p. 98–116). Thus, this research focused on the view of children,

but only in a specific situation, which was the drug addiction of their parents.

We must not omit a recently published survey by Štochlová and Kozlová (2012), which did not primarily tackle the aspects of integration of a child into a foster family, but the characteristics of children, which are decisive for their inclusion into adoption and foster care programmes, and it can therefore be assumed that they could have fundamental influence on the successfulness of integration into a family. It is apparent from the above mentioned survey that 23% of all children in the Czech Republic, who are eligible for adoption or foster care, were not placed in substitute families, while the pivotal factors influencing this figure are the age of a child eligible for adoption or foster care, then its ethnic origin and, last but not least, also its health condition (including different levels and kinds of disability).

Adaptation into a foster family from the view of children

As already mentioned, there are not many research studies which would focus on the view of a child on its role in a foster family. In our study, we have focused on the adaptation of a child into a foster family – both the nuclear one and the wider one. The qualitative research strategy was selected, which was supposed to allow us to penetrate deeply into the chosen issue. Intermediate goals focused on the motives of families to become foster parents, communication, functionality of the foster family and relationships within it. Attention was also paid to the relationship between the biological and foster family, which can be understood as a very burning issue in this context.

In the first phase of research, contact with foster parents was established (we worked with five families in total) – at first we recorded an abbreviated family history in order to get the information necessary for understanding the situation in the family. Then a semi-structured interview followed, which focused namely on the motivation for foster care, communication etc. The records were subject to open coding which provided us with answers to a number of key questions associated with the child. We consequently focused on children in a foster family themselves – for this research, we chose to use the family drawing test as a projective

method which corresponded best with our goal and intention to expose the child to stressful situations to the least possible extent. Svoboda et al. (2001, p. 300) say about the family drawing test that "it can be understood as a symbolic elaboration of the constellation of the family as a primary social group in the way the child perceives and experiences it. There are represented the opinions, feelings and attitudes of the child, and sometimes also past experiences or anticipation of the future". All information resulting from observation during the family drawing test and the final inquiry was recorded during the session. The so-called pie chart of happiness and worries was used as a supplementary method.

And what are the results of this research? For the sake of clarity, they will be presented according to the individual methods with a final, complex summary.

Nine categories emerged from the codes obtained through open coding of semi-structured interviews; the method of laying out cards was used for analytical processing of the data. It results from the interviews with parents that the most important motivation for accepting a child into foster care was usually the desire to have an extended family; one of the informants mentions infertility. Within the framework of acquainting the foster family with the child, the information seems to be important that in the case of presence of biological children in the foster family, these children participated in the initial meeting as well. Another female informant mentioned host visits within the framework of preparation for accepting the child into care. Most foster mothers called attention to a lack of time during the first meeting and the necessity of further contact. An important piece of information is the accentuated importance of harmony in family relationships and the fact that the fostered children became fully-fledged members of the family. At the same time, emphasis is placed on the need for a sufficiently long time for cementing of relationships within the family. A discrepancy occurs in cases of sibling relationships between fostered children – in one family, their rivalry is too intense and the other couple are too dependent on each other. Cooperation and mutual help between the biological children of foster parents and the adopted children is common in most cases.

From the viewpoint of functioning of foster families, the emphasis placed on communication within the family is important to us, which was mentioned by most foster parents. An active and positive attitude to problem solving both within the family and beyond it is related to this. In two families, an equal approach and fair treatment to both biological and fostered children is a highly prized priority. In the context of relationships within the wider family, various complications are mentioned, from the restraint of family members when dealing with fostered children up to the insecurity of how to treat them. In one case, even a permanent negative attitude on the side of grandparents was mentioned. A problemless situation from the point of view of accepting the child and respecting it by the wider family was described only once. A specific attribute of fostered children is their curiosity concerning biological parents. Most foster mothers were apparently ready to solve various complications and had a positive attitude towards experts whom they do not hesitate to contact in case of necessity. In the same way, their positive attitude towards the biological parents of the children also came to the fore, however, it was usually not successful.

The largest amount of data was obtained for the category biological family, which is significant for us. In two families, contact of children with their biological parents was maintained, at least at the beginning, but it did not continue. In the case of two families, biological parents showed no interest. Foster mothers often mentioned insufficient knowledge and erudition of experts, because they would have appreciated support and advice in these situations most. Placement of a child into a substitute family is usually accompanied with a change in school environment, too – there was mentioned the fact that the children have to adapt to new classmates, teachers, styles of education, etc. This process is accompanied with worse school results in several cases. Only one child had difficulties with its integration into the collective.

If we focus on the child itself, our attention will be first paid to the family drawing. The drawings were evaluated in cooperation with a clinical psychologist who has several years of experience with this technique and

specialises in projective methods. It is possible to mention from the pivotal results that some monitored children drew themselves in the first place, which testifies for their importance within the family. On the contrary, some children hesitated whether they should draw themselves and asked if they should draw themselves afterwards, which is a proof of certain insecurity whether they are part of the family. In some cases, several family members were missing in the picture and the children confirmed also during the inquiry that the family was complete. As stated by Davido (2001, p. 61), this could be a sign of latent aggressiveness or jealousy towards this family member.

In one of the drawings, there was depicted a small child who is not part of the family, which most probably represents the wish that it should be this way. It can be therefore stated that there is often discrepancy between the wishes of children and reality.

Many drawings were placed in the upper part of the paper sheet, which speaks for the fact that these pictures most probably represent the children's wishes and not reality. A mentally retarded girl highlighted the mouth area in the drawing, which is connected with communication within the family. In comparison with the information obtained during an interview with her mother, it is necessary to add that the mother points to the girl's communication problems at school as well. In addition, it is a family with equal rules for all children, which turned out to be unsuitable for this girl with a handicap.

The two most pathological drawings belonged to two siblings who had been placed into the same foster family, however, their placement had been gradual and had happened within one year. One of the children drew the figures without arms, which is indicative of more serious difficulties in relationships with people or of a feeling of guiltiness (Novák 2004, p. 13–14). Further, all the figures were drawn without pupils in their eyes, which reveals psychological deprivation. Some fostered children were not present in the drawing, which could be a significant indicator for jealousy or aggressiveness towards these individuals (Davido 2001, p. 64). Říčan, Krejčířová et al. (2006, p. 444) mention the possibility of tension and ambivalent relationship in such a case.

In the case of the second boy, it can be concluded that his drawing contained the most pathological elements of the whole research set, because he did not draw himself in the picture. All this was verified during the inquiry, where he himself confirmed that his drawing was correct and that he was sure he did not belong there. In connection with this data, it is necessary to add that this is a family with 6 children in foster care in total.

As already mentioned, a complementary method was the *pie chart of happiness and worries*. With regard to our research, the pie chart of the boy, who did not draw himself in the family picture, can be considered as a rather interesting graphic representation, because he wrote into the pie chart of happiness that his family made him happy. Here, it is certainly appropriate to think about this discrepancy. In the case of one boy, the family theme occurred several times in context with quarrels, which apparently take place in the household. The pie chart of the girl, who appears to have problems with communication, also seems to be important. According to the division of the pie chart into the individual sections, her teachers, classmates and siblings make her much happier than her parents. Here, it is also important to interpret these results in context of the parent's requirements, as already mentioned.

If we summarize our results in a more complex way, it has been established that one of the greatest complications within the framework of foster care is contact between the children and their biological family. In some cases, there is no contact at all, and if it takes place, it is accompanied by many drawbacks. It is difficult to establish firm relationships within a foster family, for the children are still influenced by their biological families or institutional education and they enter into new relationships with insecurity and worries. Further, there were demonstrated complications in the wider foster family, when grandparents or other relatives often reject the child. In spite of this, foster parents still view the situation optimistically and see accepting the child into their family in a positive way. Here, in some cases, we find a differing view of the children whose drawings contain pathologies. Negative feelings of children have been demonstrated and sometimes also their convictions that they are not part of the family.

It is necessary to state, in this place, that qualitative research has allowed us to go deeper into family relationships than it would be the case with the use of quantitative research. Although this is a smaller research set and the survey provided us with an in-depth view of relationships in the foster families, both from the viewpoint of the child and of the parent, it is obvious that these results cannot be generalised, but they should be understood as a precious insight into possible problems of raising children in a foster family. In connection with differing views on integration on the side of children and foster parents, there is the question whether this is not an issue relevant to families with a larger number of fostered children. However, this would be a topic for further research.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the used methods, no abnormal pathology has been detected in the individual families. It is, namely, necessary to realise that minor discrepancies can also be found in biological families which are functional. The view of foster parents

was usually more positive than the view of children, which indicates that it is necessary to give the children enough time so that they could get used to the new environment and the whole integration into the family proceeded non-violently and gradually. It is reasonable to suppose that if parents decide to accept a child into a foster family, they usually have strong inner and humane reasons and want to offer an affectionate environment to children who were primarily not so lucky.

Especially the fact, that more discrepancies and complications occurred in more numerous families, should be taken into consideration. It is therefore reasonable to consider how many children should be recommended for foster care. Despite this it is necessary to bear in mind the individuality of each case. Finally, we believe that it is necessary to mention the effort of foster parents to treat all children equally, both the biological and the fostered ones – from the rational point of view, this attitude seems to be ideal. It is, however, also necessary to keep in mind the fact that every child has its own past and sometimes even a burdening diagnosis. The way, in which parents treat their own children in biological families, is desirable in these cases as well.

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