

RELATIONSHIPS IN FOSTER CARE

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Nº31 – Support for the well-being of foster children and the quality of foster care: limits and possibilities

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Objectives

Social relationships are central in promoting the socio-emotional well-being of vulnerable groups, including children in out-of-home care. Nonetheless, pre- and in- care adversities often leave children in out-of-home care with few long-lasting connections to rely on for support. In this paper we will introduce Lifelong Links which is a new way of working for children in out-of-home care which aims to restore children's relationships with members of their extended family and other trusted adults. Lifelong Links utilises the Family Group Conferencing model as a mechanism for (re)establishing social connections.

Methods

This paper draws on mixed-methods evaluations of Lifelong Links in both England and Scotland. Data from qualitative semi-structured interviews and focus groups with professionals working in children's social care, foster carers and children and young people are included. The paper also utilises summaries of the objectives and outcomes determined by young people at the start of Lifelong Links.

Results

The evaluation findings suggest that children in out-of-home care have a rich and varied social network of important people with whom they can reconnect, often overlooked by children's social care services. Restrictions of contact with family members, first introduced at entry to out-of-home care to avoid perceived risks of harm, often remained in place in the longer term. Family dynamics also contributed to the loss of relationships. The findings also indicate that Lifelong Links supports the concept of relational stability, with the recognition that relationships can continue beyond placements, and that foster carers and birth family members can work collaboratively. Further, an increased sense of identity and belonging

comes through as a key benefit of Lifelong Links. Young people highly valued information about their backgrounds, family histories and the circumstances that led to out-of-home care. These supported young people's picture and understanding of themselves, helping them to feel more emotionally settled.

Conclusions

Our findings highlight the need for social network informed practices in social work with children in out-of-home care and similarly disadvantaged populations. The success of Lifelong Links has been linked to its independence as a service, and the child-led nature of the interventions. The evaluation results also support some of the findings from the Independent Care Review in Scotland, and recent policy initiatives aimed at supporting young people's relationships, such as 'Staying Together and Connected'.

Recommendations

- Social network informed practices should be utilised whenever conducting social work with children or young people.
- Interventions and work with children and young people should be child-led as far as practically possible.
- Further efforts should be made to ensure children and young people in out-of-home care have a clear and honest understanding of their family background and circumstances.

Nº6 – Enduring relationships and commitment: The role of relationships between adolescent entrants to foster care and foster carers

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Adolescent entrants, in this research, are defined as young people who enter, or re-enter foster care aged eleven or above. Adolescents continue to be the largest group of young people in the care system (DFE, 2021), however, there remains a lack of sufficient research acknowledging the challenges, and more importantly the opportunities for support of adolescent entrants to foster care and their foster carers.

This research aims to develop conceptual and theoretical insights into how relationships and commitment are experienced by adolescent entrants and their foster carers – a crucial dimension of social support.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 adolescent entrants (both young people currently in foster care and care-experienced adults), and 12 foster carers with experience of caring for adolescent entrants. Data collection took place prior and during the COVID19 pandemic, as a result changes to the original research design were implemented, therefore interviews include face-to-face and via virtual technologies. Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology guided the entire research process.

Findings suggest the following conceptual categories: navigating the social work context & pathways through foster care; negotiating family & the process of sustaining fostering relationships; negotiating adolescence & navigating sense of self and pathway to adulthood.

The impact of quality, committed and supportive relationships between adolescent entrants to foster care and their foster carers, even if the relationship itself does not endure, was the central concept underpinning all of the categories and layers described above. The foundations underpinning this process of building and sustaining supportive and enduring relationships encompasses the core dimensions of vulnerability, acceptance and interdependence. These dimensions were experienced on a spectrum of reciprocity, with the relationship experienced as fluid and dynamic at one end, to more fixed and rigid at the other.

This presentation will use case examples from the research to illustrate the challenges and opportunities for foster care being a supportive intervention for adolescent entrants, particularly focusing on the dimensions of enduring relationships.

Recommendations

- A need to think beyond stability (which often equates placement endings with the end of relationships) as a measure of successful outcomes of foster care.
- The impact of quality, committed and supportive relationships can transcend the initial foster placement, and endure into adulthood – suggesting a need for a life-course perspective being used in further developing foster care support for adolescent entrants.

References

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Nº18 – Making memories last: a longitudinal Swiss study on support measures to overcome fragile belonging of children and adolescents in foster care

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Objectives

Connectedness and belonging are sources of mental health in young people. Yet, “the question of belonging [becomes] particularly relevant for those whose belonging is not taken for granted”, as Göbel et al. (2020, p. 134) stress in relation to young people in foster care. In Switzerland, an estimated number of 18,000 children and adolescents cannot grow up with their families of origin. Their childhood and youth are often characterized by fragile relationships and multiple homes. These experiences are biographically formative. As our ongoing SNSF study shows, they can even have transgenerational consequences. As the first qualitative longitudinal study in Switzerland, our project accompanies children and young people in foster care over several years and develops specific tools that can be applied for self-determined biographical documentation and work. We are interested in how children and adolescents in foster care experience “belonging”, and how they can be supported in documenting their sense of belonging und thus integrating it in their biographical “golden thread”.

Method

Our project is located at the intersection of research and practice and consists of three phases:

- (I) Participatory and practice-oriented development of a web app called “MemoryBox” which enables children and adolescents to collect memories of foster care and to save them for the long term. *(running)*
- (II) Participatory and evidence-based development of creative tools to capture memories that are finally made available in a “suitcase of methos” (German Methodenkoffer). *(running)*

(III) Qualitative research project focusing belonging of children and adolescents in foster care through their application of the “MemoryBox” and “suitcase of methods” over a period of three years. (*planned*)

All phases are conducted in close cooperation with children and adolescents in foster care, foster care institutions and associations.

Results

At the IFCRN conference we will present the results obtained by then, i.e. the results of phase I (web app “MemoryBox” and its evaluation), the intermediate results of phase II (“suitcase of methos”) and the chances and challenges for the planned qualitative research project (phase III).

Conclusions

In the previous years the awareness for long-term effects of foster care have risen as e.g. studies on care leaving show. Supporting children and adolescents to document their sense of belonging during foster care enhances their chance of integrating this meaningful phase of their life into their biography – and to make it available for biographical reflection later in life.

Recommendations / takeaway points for the audience

- Belonging is an important concept to consider when reflecting long term, including transgenerational effects of foster care.
- Support measures of belonging should be included into quality standards of foster care.
- Support measures must consider the particularities of foster care such as changing care settings, multiple family belongings and leaving care issues.

Bibliography

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Nº41 – Social support in group intervention: a facilitator of change in families of the child protection system

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Background

To achieve stable family reunification, a series of interventions and resources are launched, such as the provision of economic, social, school, home or even therapeutic support if there is a problem of mental health or substance addiction, in addition to a possible intervention of socio-educational character aimed at improving parental skills (Balsells et al., 2016a). Facilitating birth parents' access to the full continuum of services and integrating them into the overall case plan is crucial to resolving concerns to ensure the child's safety and eventual reunification (Fernandez 2014).

In this way, programs that seek to support the specific parental competences that families have to develop in a process of reception and reunification represent a necessary strategy for the improvement in the exercise of parenthood (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2011).

The group methodology offers professionals and families a new way of addressing learning situations in a more satisfactory and effective way (Amorós et al., 2009). This intervention format offers important opportunities to help families through the significance of their strengths, to reduce stigma and the sense of social isolation, in addition to increasing the training and social support of families (Balsells et al., 2016a). In the same way, group work allows the creation of support dynamics among group members that help fathers and mothers feel more valued and more comfortable (Balsells 2006).

Objectives

The main aim of the study presented is to identify the elements of group intervention in the child protection system that promote the creation of formal and informal networks and to analyze the support networks of families that participate in the reunification program "Walking in family".

Methodology

On the one hand, this communication presents a systematic review of the scientific literature that shows how the formal and informal networks of the child protection system contribute to favor the social support of families that participate in social and educational intervention programs.

On the other hand, it also presents the results of the Social Networks Analysis of 10 families' supports in the reunification process.

Results

Results show that social support is considered a process by which social resources are provided from formal (professional services and programs associated with those services in any of the protection, health or educational systems) and informal (extended family, friends, neighbors and acquaintances) networks, allowing the families to confront daily moments as well as in crisis situations. This social support is related to emotional, psychological, physical, instrumental, material and information support that allow families to face their difficulties. Formal and informal networks of child protection systems contribute to social support, resilience, consolidation of learning and the assistance of families to social intervention programs.

The resulting networks of these families can be classified into three large groups:

1. A first group of people who mainly perceive professional support (mainly emotional support and information).
2. A second group of families in which they identify as sources of support (mainly psychological) to family members, but also identify the families and professionals who participated in the group intervention as sources of mainly emotional support.
3. Finally, families that identify the main sources of support (emotional, psychological and information) to the participants of the group intervention, both equal and professional.

Conclusion

We can find four key elements of group intervention that favor the possible creation of an informal support network. It has been decided to divide these elements into four large groups: a) changes in participants, b) changes in the development and results of the program, c) changes in the perception of formal and informal support and d) desire to offer support to other families in the same situation.

It's important to emphasize that all families identify as important sources of support those people with whom they have shared the group intervention program, relying on their peers in bad times and verbalizing that they themselves they have felt sources of support for the other families.