

SOCIAL SUPPORT IN TRANSITIONS

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Nº22 – Challenges for social support of transition processes in foster care in Chile

FRAMEWORK OF THE SYMPOSIUM

There is wide recognition of the superiority of family settings over institutional settings as protective measures on developmental outcomes and well-being of children under the care of child protection systems. In Chile, foster care is being promoted but there are still many challenges to face. One of the challenges relates to transitions. Children typically experience numerous transitions throughout their stay in alternative care. Transitions between caregivers influence children's general development (Warner et al., 2017).

Thus, when a child is moved from foster care to adoption there are many things to take into consideration. However, child protection systems consider children as total passive recipients of care and restrict their social, political, and subjective agency. Child protection policies and practices still minimize the importance of maintaining flows and continuities in established and "psychologically permanent" relationships for the children involved (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010; Ward, 2011). However, the experiences of children who transit through the care system show that child circulation can be understood as a form of flexible, non-fixed movement, which implies stabilities and multiple cares (Stryker & Yngvesson, 2013; Wissöet al. 2018), in which children actively make sense of their experiences and actively engage in their caregiving relationships (Cushing, Samuels & Kerman, 2014; Mason, 2008).

The aims of this proposed symposium are to address the Chilean experience regarding the challenge of strengthening family base-care settings as protection measures for children who cannot live with their caregivers/parents, as well as the challenge of support transition processes in foster care.

The first paper presents findings from a Chilean on the experiences of foster caregivers regarding the process of fostering, with a particular focus in beginning and end of placement and relevant factor in transitions. Paper two explores the perception of foster parents in relation to visits or family contact between foster children with their birth family. The third paper analyses the narratives of a group of Chilean foster families, regarding the transitions and the handover of the child they cared for to their new adoptive family. Paper four presents findings on the matching decision-making process in foster care and discusses some of the

main factors that impact matching decisions in Chile, and highlighting the finding about lack of protocols and systematized procedures for making matching decisions. Finally, the fifth paper describes a new program to recruit foster families in Chile: FAE CAPTACION. This program is being implemented on a pilot basis and this presentation will describe its rationale, work methodology, and preliminary results (in one of the three regions of the country where it has been implemented).

“Saying hello and goodbye” Foster carers’ perceptions and the role of social support

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Presentation	Manuela García - Quiroga

Objectives

Foster care is widely used around the world as a form of alternative care for children without appropriate parental care. Following international recommendations, some countries have recently started to develop a formal system of foster care, in Chile a legislative framework laid the foundations for a new foster care system as a priority for children separated from their parents due to protectional measures. Several factors have been linked to outcomes for children in foster care, a great number of them are linked to caregivers’ factors. However, in Chile there is scarce research published regarding the experience of foster caregivers and the relationship they establish with the children they care for. This study explores the experiences of foster caregivers regarding the process of fostering, with a particular focus in beginning and end of placement and relevant factor in transitions.

Method

This study focuses on the experiences of non-kinship caregivers (n=14) in 8 different foster care programs in Chile. Semi structured interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was developed in order to analyse the interviews.

Results and conclusions

Caregivers share a positive experience of fostering and an emotional relationship with the children, attachment is mentioned as an important part of this relationship and adoption is a

recurrent theme. Linked to this, caregivers mention several difficulties regarding the starting and end of placements. Transitions are often very difficult, and caregivers mention the need of support in these processes. Some sources of support (real and potential) were identified.

Additionally, two different groups of foster caregivers were identified one named as “transitional mother” and the other as “keepers” each of them with a particular view of their role and experience. Themes are described for the group as a whole and for each subgroup. Implications for policy, practice and research are discussed.

Key words

Foster care, caregiver, relationship, social support, thematic analysis, Chile.

Highlights:

- Caregivers express several difficulties to cope with foster children’s transitions in placements.
- Need of social support is crucial in order to continue their role as caregivers.
- Several sources of support were identified, some of them as potential sources to be developed by programs.

Visits and family contact in foster care: experiences from a Chilean foster parents’ perspective

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Presentation	All the authors

Objectives

This paper aims to describe the perception of foster parents in relation to visits or contact between foster children with their birth family.

Methodology

A mixed (qualitative/quantitative) method approach was used, with a cross-sectional design and a descriptive scope (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014).

The sample for the study consisted in 29 foster families (kinship and non-kinship), from the Metropolitan Region and Valparaíso in Chile. The average age of foster parents was 41.34 years, with a minimum of 22 and a maximum of 62 years; children's mean age was 5.22, with a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 9 years.

Results

It was found that: a) A high proportion of children had not visits or contact with their birth families (51.7%); b) The figure who visited the children more frequently was the mother (78.6%); c) A low percentage of foster parents (17.2%) indicates that the child presents less favorable emotional or behavioral changes after the visit with his birth family, mainly, they refer to the expression of unpleasant emotions, such as irritability, sadness, and, also in the behavioral domain (1 case) such as introversion expressed in the decrease in communication with the foster parent, d) 31% of the foster parents consider that there are positive aspects in the visits or contact, among these, the continuity of the affective bonds with birth parents or siblings and the recognition of their origins and identity, e) 62.1% of foster parents consider that there are unfavorable aspects in the contact, for instance, the lack of continuity or interest on the part of birth families in visits or care for their children, f) foster parents suggest: to reinforce the supervision processes of the visits, to identify situations of risk in the family of origin, and to improve the coordination between the Family Court and Foster Family Programs, g) the therapeutic process carried out by the Foster Family Programs is highlighted, as a key factor of the specialized social support network, to prepare children for visits, and the accompaniment and framing with the family of origin to protect the rights of children.

Conclusions:

- High percentage of children had no visits or contact with their birth family.
- According to foster families there are protection and risk factors in visits or family contact.
- Foster families highlighted the therapeutic approach and protection of the rights of children as a protective factor from the Foster Family Programs.
- Foster families also identified factors to be reinforced, such as the supervision processes that guarantee the well-being of children.

- Greater recognition is required from the Family Court to the assessment of the Foster Family Programs.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen the process of accompaniment and supervision of the Foster Family Programs.
2. Improve collaborative work between Courts and Foster Family Programs.

“Children are not packages”: Foster families’ perspectives on the transition to adoption

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International research shows largely positive impact of adoption on children’s life trajectories, providing an experience of belonging and stability and allowing them to recover from early adversities (Juffer et al., 2011). At the same time, adoption represents one of the most radical changes that a child can experience, as it involves multiple and ambiguous separations, grief and loss from primary caregivers and the network of family, friends, pets, and community (Neil & Beek, 2020). Over the last decades, Chilean adoptions have moved from voluntary relinquishment of babies to the termination of parental rights (SENAME, 2021). Additionally, new Chilean child protection policies has progressively increased the number of children adopted from other foster caregivers with whom has bonded. Transitions can be critical in the adoptive trajectory of children adopted from care (Rolock et al. 2018). Foster families can become the only stable and secure figures in children's lives, and separation from them can make the transition to adoption more challenging (Boswell & Cudmore, 2017) which in turn increases the risk of adoption breakdown (Selwyn et al., 2014). Child distress related to moving from foster home to adoptive placement has also been linked to poorer outcomes (Neil et al., 2020). Moreover, transitions often occur within very short timeframes, with contact between the child and the foster family being interrupted for months or forever. However, transitions may be smoother if there is temporal and relational overlap between the foster and adoptive family systems (Neil et al., 2020), which can be fostered through partnerships between foster and adoptive families and ongoing contact and support during

and after the transition (Neil et al., 2018). However, there are no studies in Chile that explore in depth transitions from foster care to adoption and social support needs.

Objectives

In the framework of the FONDECYT N°11200491 project "Rethinking adoption from the children's perspective: life story work, transitions and relationships" (2020-2023), this paper explores the narratives of foster caregivers regarding the end of care and transitions of the child to their new adoptive family.

Methodology

A qualitative study was conducted through narrative interviews with 10 foster carers

Results and conclusions

Foster carers report that transitions are very difficult times, in large part, due to the lack of social support and the difficulties for professionals to deal with the complex emotions that arise at the time of the child's movement towards adoption. In addition, foster carers report that some professionals consider that it is better for the well-being, stability of the child and success of the adoption that transitions are brief and without contact between foster and adoptive families. Implications for policies, practices and research are discussed.

Key words:

Foster care, transitions, adoption, Chile.

Highlights:

- There is an increasing number of children adopted from foster care.
- Specialised services and professionals poorly support transition.
- Putting children's needs and rights at the centre of the transition process is key.

Nº8.1 – A comparison of the socioemotional and cognitive functioning between adopted and institution-reared children: A Chilean study

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Presentation	Pamela Jiménez Etcheverría

Objectives

To date, little research has compared the socioemotional and cognitive functioning of adopted and institution-reared children in Latin America despite the large number of children living in alternative care. Findings are presented from the first study investigating the psychological adjustment and cognitive functioning of adopted children in comparison with children living in institutions in Chile. In addition, factors associated with the psychological outcomes of adopted children are examined.

Method

Data will be presented from two groups: 52 adopted and 50 institution-reared children, aged 4 to 9 years. The researcher visited families at home and also visited institution reared children at 12 institutions. Adoptive parents, caregivers and teachers completed the Relationship Problems Questionnaire (RPQ) to assess attachment-related problems. To assess children's levels of externalizing and internalizing problems, adoptive parents, caregivers and teachers completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). In addition, for both the RPQ and the SDQ questionnaires the proportion of children above cut-off for clinical problems was examined. Finally, cognitive functioning (for children aged 6 or older) was assessed using a short version of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children.

Results

The total RPQ score revealed a significant difference between groups as reported by mothers/caregivers ($F(1, 99) = 11.67, p = .001$), with adopted children showing lower scores for reactive attachment disorder. Differences were also found between the groups for behavioral problems as assessed by the SDQ completed by mothers/caregivers ($F(1, 98) = 7.27, p = .008$). In all cases the institutionalised children scored higher, indicating greater behavioural and emotional problems in institution-reared children than in adopted children.

While the majority of adopted children did not show signs of attachment disorder, a high percentage of institutionalized children showed clinical levels of attachment and behavioral difficulties.

There were significant differences for the Full-Scale IQ score between groups ($F(1, 71) = 15.63$, $p < .001$). The mean IQ score of adopted children was 23 points higher than that of the institutionalised group.

Conclusions

Adopted children showed significantly higher levels of socio-emotional and cognitive functioning than institution-reared children, with the majority of adopted children scoring within the normal range and the majority of institutionalised children showed clinical levels of emotional and behavioural problems. The mean IQ score of adopted children was 23 points higher than that of the institutionalised group. A younger age at adoption was associated with more positive outcomes among the adopted children. Although a selection effect cannot be ruled out, with higher functioning children more likely to be adopted, the results point to a beneficial effect of family care-based on the psychological development and well-being of children in Chile.

Highlights

- Chilean adoptees are better adjusted than institutionalized children, and the latter show high levels of emotional and behavioral problems.
- In Chile, children in institutions are at increased risk for psychological problems.
- The results of this study can be used to inform decision-making process in child protection, privileging family alternatives over institutional ones.

Nº8.2 – Characterization of the decision-making process in matching children with foster families in the Chilean child protection system

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Presentation	All the authors

Objectives

In the Chilean child protection system, residential care has a strong tradition and the implementation of family-like alternatives has been slow and full of challenges. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the current practices related to foster care in order to detect areas for improvement. The process of placing a child in a specific foster family –matching - might be one of the areas that require urgent attention in Chile. The objective of this paper is to characterize the decision-making processes regarding the placement of children who require non-kinship foster family through the description of guidelines and criteria used by practitioners to perform these procedures.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 practitioners, who were working in 6 foster care organizations with matching responsibilities in 5 regions of the country. We used the Weighted Hierarchical Analysis (Análisis Jerárquico Ponderado; Perez-Luco, 2005) to extract, from what was reported by the participants, a structure of meanings that allowed a deep understanding of the factors that professionals consider when making matching decisions. The Decision-Making Ecology framework (DME; Baumann et al., 2011) was applied to structure the different elements influencing in matching decision.

Results

We identified a lack of protocols and systematized procedures for making matching decisions. The DME framework allowed us to organize the decision-making factors identified into 5 groups. Case factors and caregiver factors were the most frequently mentioned by practitioners. According to the analysis, both factors had the same weight in the final decision. Case factors more frequently mentioned referred to risk assessment and specific situations. Caregiver factors focused on characteristics of foster families, their needs and results of their

assessment process. Other categories identified were the child factors (their characteristics or attachment style), the organization factors (organization's frameworks), and the decision-maker factors (intuition or matching experiences).

Conclusion

This study suggests that the foster family shortage in Chile could impact the matching decisions. Practitioners do not have many family-like alternatives and often need to compromise their decision-making process. The analysis shows that the importance of certain factors in making matching decisions was different depending on the timing of judicial process. For example, caregivers' factors were important before removing children from the birth family; on the other hand, case factors were highlighted after removing children. These findings provide new knowledge about the matching process in Chile, and could be helpful to develop new strategies in matching decision process, organizing the complexity of information and developing guidelines.

Highlights

- In Chile there is a lack of protocols and systematized procedures for making matching decisions in foster care.
- Matching represents a specific decision, related to the case, the caregivers, children, organizations, and decision makers factors.
- The importance of different factors in making matching decisions is different, depending on the timing of judicial process.