

# Providing support services for foster parents in family foster care

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### **Framework of the symposium**

This symposium consists of four parts, all focusing on support services offered by foster care agencies, namely:

1. Experience of foster care guidance by foster mothers: a Q-study, Johan Vanderfaeillie, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Department Psychology.
2. A Trauma-Informed Approach to Supervising Contact Visits, Adena Hoffnung (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) Assouline & Cigal Knei-Paz (Tel Aviv University).
3. Implementation of trauma-informed approach in Flemish foster care, Lenny Trogh, Centre of Expertise Foster Care Flanders.
4. Development of a sensorimotor group training for traumatized foster children and foster parents, Sarah Keyaert, Foster Care Agency 'Pleegzorg Vlaams-Brabant en Brussel.

In the first contribution, Johan Vanderfaeillie describes a study into the implementation of foster care guidance in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium) and how this is experienced by Flemish foster parents. The results show that foster care workers are mainly focused on the development of the foster child. In order to promote the development of the foster child, foster care workers adapt guidance of participants (foster child, birth parents, foster mothers) to their needs.

With regard to foster child's needs, the large presence of trauma-related difficulties, combined with the current scientific knowledge about trauma, the necessity to develop and provide trauma-informed care has increased in Flemish Foster Care. Therefore, the following three contributions focus on the development and implementation of trauma-informed interventions. These interventions can be offered as a form of treatment foster care by specially trained foster care professionals, on top of the regular guidance offered by foster care workers.

Adena Hoffnung Assouline and Cigal Knei-Paz describe a practice model for professionals accompanying supervised visits between foster children and their birth parents, using principles of Child Parent Psychotherapy, an evidenced based trauma-responsive dyadic intervention for young children. It enables professionals supervising the visits to address the traumatic experiences that led to the circumstances of supervised visitation and respond to the difficult emotions for all those involved. The model is illustrated by case vignettes.

Recently, the model described by Hoffnung Assouline and Knei-Paz, was implemented in Flemish foster care. Lenny Trogh will focus on the implementation process and on the experiences of all parties involved (foster children, birth parents, foster parents, and foster care workers).

Finally, Sarah Keyaert describes a recently developed sensorimotor group training for foster children and foster parents. The primary aim is to help foster children who have experienced trauma, to become less overwhelmed by sensations and emotions associated with their traumatic past. The foster child's body awareness and sense of self control is increased through stabilizing and body-oriented work.

# 1. Experience of foster care guidance by foster mothers: a Q-study

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Affiliation	Vrije Universiteit Brussel; Pleegzorg Vlaams-Brabant en Brussel
Presentation	Johan Vanderfaeillie

**Objectives:** Although many research is available on the support needs of foster parents as well as on the related tasks of foster care workers, insight into the implementation of foster care guidance and how this is experienced by foster parents is lacking.

**Methods:** With an exploratory Q-study, it is examined with what frequency tasks are done by foster care workers according to the foster mothers and whether different profiles of guidance can be distinguished. 28 foster mothers in long-term foster care from one out of five Flemish foster care agencies filled in the Q-sort. They sorted 36 tasks of a foster care worker regarding the frequency on an 11-point scale ranging from "not often performed" (-5), to "very often performed" (+5).

**Results:** "Monitoring the development of the foster child through conversations with the foster mother and the foster child" was most frequently performed task. "Monitoring the foster child's development through questionnaires and observing parenting" was the least frequently performed task. Using factor analysis two profiles of guidance were distinguished. They differ regarding supporting cooperation between all parties involved, supporting the biological parents, promoting the well-being of the foster parents and the parenting of the foster child.

**Conclusion:** Foster care workers are focused on the development of the foster child. In order to promote the development of the foster child, guidance of participants (foster child, birth parents, foster mothers) is adapted to their needs.

Takeaway points:

- Monitoring the development of the foster child through conversations with the foster mother and the foster child” was most frequently performed task
- Two groups of foster care guidance could be distinguished
- Guidance is adapted to the needs of stakeholders in the foster care placement

## 2. A Trauma-Informed Approach to Supervising Contact Visits

Authors	Adena Hoffnung Assouline Cigal Knei-Paz
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Presentation	Adena Hoffnung Assouline

Children who have been removed from their homes as a result of maltreatment and have been placed in foster, continue to meet their birth parents by court decision. This contact is often held under supervision. Supervised contact is intended to provide children the opportunity to maintain the parent-child relationship in a safe and neutral setting. Unfortunately, findings suggest professionals supervising visits have limited practice skills to help build constructive relationships through contact visits. Thereby, in many cases supervised contact can be harmful, undermining the children’s sense of security and placement stability.

While the literature highlights various aspects that need to be implemented in order to improve visits, there is a lack of a trauma-informed approach, whereby professionals supervising the visits can address the traumatic experiences that led to the circumstances of supervised visitation and respond to the difficult emotions for all those involved.

This presentation will provide a practice model for professionals accompanying supervised visits using principles of Child Parent Psychotherapy, an evidenced based trauma-responsive dyadic intervention for young children. Case vignettes will illustrate how professionals supervising contact can address the child’s trauma history and assist both birth parents and foster parents in responding to the child’s attachment needs following trauma, as well as how

the professionals can provide support to birth parents and foster parents, thereby promoting safety and improving child-parent interactions.

Recommendations will be offered for attaining the best clinical practices and training in supervised contact.

### 3. Implementation of trauma-informed approach in Flemish foster care

Authors	Lenny Trogh
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Presentation	Lenny Trogh

There is an increasing trend in the number of young children placed in foster care in Flanders and Brussels. Familial problems, such as inadequate housing, poverty and domestic violence (81%) and parenting problems, such as neglect and abuse (68%), were the main reasons for placement. On top of these statistics, every foster child necessarily experiences one traumatic event prior to placement, namely the (temporary) separation of their parents. Such separation can lead to disrupted attachment patterns and increases the likelihood of developing mental health problems in adulthood. In addition to parental separation, 85% of Flemish foster children experienced at least one other traumatic event.

Combined with the current scientific knowledge about trauma and the large presence of trauma-related difficulties among the foster children in the Flemish Foster Care Services, the need to develop and provide trauma-informed care has increased. This trauma-informed vision and approach is applied at all levels of the foster care services (development of vision, management, team leaders, social workers, guidance method, therapeutic treatment models,...).

The focus of this presentation is specifically on how a trauma-informed view and trauma-informed framework is used and implemented in the context of visits between foster children and their parents. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 9, states

that children have the right to maintain personal relationships with their parents, unless this is not in their best interest. The Flemish youth care policy therefore emphasizes the maintenance of connections between foster children and their parents. If possible, parents are involved in the placement and parent-child contacts are facilitated. In some cases, visits are supervised because safety needs to be ensured for the children. During the contacts, e.g. the behavior of the parents, or their presence, can again evoke feelings of anxiety and distress in the foster child, because he or she is again reminded of possible traumatizing experiences that he or she has already experienced or is reliving in the past.

The need for a trauma-informed approach in function of contacts between parents and their children is obvious, based on the abovementioned information.

During the presentation attention will be paid to the already acquired goals and also to the obstacles we confronted, so that the participants can learn from the trajectory we have followed in the services for foster care in Flanders and Brussels.

How did we develop a trauma-informed view on contacts between parents and their children?

What content and theoretical framework supported us in doing so?

What was needed for the development and implementation of a trauma-informed framework in function of contacts?

How do the foster care workers experience this?

How do the foster children, foster parents and parents experience this trauma-informed approach?

## 4. Development of a sensorimotor group training for traumatized foster children and foster parents

Authors	Sarah Keyaert Marjan Klingels Lisa Van Hove Frank Van Holen
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Presentation	Sarah Keyaert

This contribution describes and illustrates a group training for young traumatized foster children (between the age of 4 and 12) and their foster parents. In addition to being separated from their parents, 85% of Flemish foster children experienced at least one extra traumatic event. Experiencing trauma in early childhood may result in several negative outcomes on many levels, which may in their turn lead to behavioral and emotional problems and physical and mental problems lasting into adulthood. Interventions aimed at dealing with and reducing traumatic stress responses are therefore indicated (Vanderfaeillie et al., 2014).

This group training was developed based on theoretical insights of trauma experts like Bruce Perry, Bessel Van der Kolk and Arianne Struik and principles from Sherborne and therapeutic yoga for children.

The primary aim of the training is teaching foster children who have experienced trauma how to become less overwhelmed by sensations and emotions associated with their traumatic past. By offering stabilizing and body-oriented work we try to increase the foster child's body awareness and sense of self control. Throughout the whole training we work on several sub-goals: increasing impulse control and the ability to generate different solutions, inhibition of inappropriate behavior, increasing interoception and affect regulation, adjusting threat detection and sense of time, building a coherent narrative and creating a positive relational experience.

Each practical session shows the same structure in which we offer sensorimotor interventions like grounding, breathing and movement exercises, yoga and massages. Before introducing the practical group sessions foster parents are invited to follow a psycho-educational session in which both theoretical principles and the practical content of the future sessions are being presented. In the practical part two phases can be distinguished. In the first phase trainers

stimulate and help foster children to explore sensory sensations during three one hour sessions on a weekly basis. In a second phase the foster child is offered the same structure of exercises in three more sessions, but is now invited to perform them together with the foster parent. On top of exploring sensory sensations this also introduces body-oriented work to foster parents and aims at strengthening the relationship between foster parent and foster child.

After completing the full group training each foster child and foster parent receive a set of cards and instructions on which the exercises are listed so they can practice all of them at home.

The training has not yet been examined for effectiveness. However, the participants' findings are unanimously positive and so far there has been no drop-out.

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