

DECISION MAKING IN FOSTER CARE

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Nº10 – Placing older children and teenagers in Foster family: an Italian experience

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In Italy, about 30.000 children and adolescents are removed from their biological families. Nearly half of them are placed at educational communities for minors and they often stay there for a long time. In many cases professionals and judges think they can't be placed in a family. This is because of their psychological and behavioural difficulties and/or because they are too old to be welcomed into a foster family.

In truth, it's not easy to find people who are open to receive these minors, especially if they are presented with many emotional and behavioural problems. It creates a great challenge for foster parents to take care of them. Consequently, many professionals think it's impossible to place them in a foster family project.

KAIROS Association, founded with the aim to change this situation, is looking for families who are open to receive these children. To achieve this goal, we have built a specific model to prepare and support these specific foster parents. We believe that this is the solution and encourages successful foster families.

The model involves different phases:

- a. Information activity to identify interested candidates for foster care.
- b. Preparation of the candidates by specific theoretical and practical training, including a mindfulness activity.
- c. Applicants' psychological and educational evaluation through a meeting and completing specific tasks.
- d. Matching the child and the family in collaboration with the public social services; whom are in charge the biological family.
- e. Support the fosterers for two years through group meetings, psychological support and educational help. What proves to be very effective support is the tutor's role. This

consists of an educator; available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This constant support guides foster families through every problem they could experience.

This paper aims to present our model and discusses some of the most important protective factors for the foster family of teenagers. This is to safeguard the process, ensuring a positive experience for all those involved. Recommendations for the recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers are discussed

Nº15 – What do professionals agree on when it comes to proposing family foster care?

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Decision-making in family foster care is a very complex process, both for the nature of the issues to be decided and for the positive or negative implications that it can have on the children's lives, foster parents and families of origin. Focusing the research on decision-making is to go to the core of the protection system. This communication aims to analyse the factors that influence the professionals' decision making regarding foster care in Catalonia (Spain), taking into account that there are three services that are involved throughout the process for the same child, as well as the coincidences and discrepancies regarding the importance they attribute to the different factors related to the decision-making process. With the use of a questionnaire collecting quantitative and qualitative data, on one hand, we analysed 90 cases of children in foster care assessed by the three teams, and on the other hand, we obtained the assessment of 57 professionals from 28 teams on general aspects of decision-making. The results highlight how the factors of the young age of the child and the low likelihood of family reunification have an important influence when it comes to making a proposal for family foster care, which opens the debate on the place that foster care currently has within the protection system. In general, there is a strong coincidence in the weighting of most of the factors and there are also some discrepancies, such as on the participation of the child in the decision-making process. The results will be discussed on the factors that professionals take into account in relation to family foster care, both when making the initial proposal and with regard to the schedule of visits and the type and temporality of the placement, in order to make proposals for improvement in professional practice and child policies. Improvements such as the importance of establishing and agreeing on objectives when working with the families-both foster families and families of origin-and above all with the children, promoting teamwork between the teams and between the teams and the children.

Nº13 – Impact of the quality of foster care placement on the justified or unjustified coercive nature of such placement

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Description/objectives

The research (Aug. 2021-Feb. 2023) concentrates on normative frameworks permitting unjustified coercive decisions² in foster care during three key timeframes in Switzerland (1900-1981/1981-2012 and post 2013). These timeframes are based on the main child welfare reforms. The research will aim to answer the following questions:

1. How were coercive decisions leading to the removal and placement of children in a foster family, prevented through family support initiatives and adapted considering evolving international standards?
2. How were coercive decisions leading to the removal and foster care placement of children, adapted in light of evolving international standards?
3. When coercive decisions fall outside of permissible/justifiable scope of evolving international standards, what pathways are available for accessing justice?

Methodology

- *legal analysis*, informed by the theoretical perspective alert to those domains of intersectionality and how they may manifest in policy trends and assumptions in legal decision-making. The data extraction process will produce consistent descriptions of the data collected providing the basis for analysis and synthesis.
- *qualitative research*, that examines both in-depth interviews and case studies, through method and result triangulation to answer the research questions. **Around 40 interviews were conducted at federal level, as well as in the Cantons of Valais and Zurich, with practitioners from child protection offices and authorities responsible for the protection of the child and adult (set up after an important reform entered into force in 2013 in Switzerland); private organisations involved in foster care placements,**

historians, anthropologists, sociologists and economists. A consent and information fact sheet was shared before the interviews and specific questions drafted for each of them. Those interviews were followed by a case review consisting in the analysis of around 60 children's files (30 for the Canton of Valais and 30 for the Canton of Zurich) after obtention of the agreement of the the relevant Ethics Committee(s) in the Valais and Zurich. The cases were chosen according to the following criteria: period of time (10 cases for each of the three periods covered by the research), demographics of the children and parents (age, gender, marital status, migrant background) and voluntary/unvoluntary placements.

Results

The results demonstrate how international standards have gradually created frameworks and thus restrictions to unjustified coercive measures in foster care placement and how these international standards influence Swiss legislation and practices.

In addition, amongst its results, the research identifies indicators of quality foster care placement in terms of a step-by-step process (evaluation, selection, authorization, preparation, training, follow-up) until its finalization and beyond, as well as of resources (human and financial) invested. Such indicators will identify the gaps in the Swiss regulatory framework and practices that still lead to unjustified coercive decisions.

Conclusions

Although significant progress can be observed in foster care placement in Switzerland, challenges remain regarding its unjustified coercive nature with regard to international standards. Avenues of reflection and action will be suggested to encourage promising practices in Switzerland and move forward (regulatory framework and practices more in line with international standards).

Recommendations/takeaway points

- take into account the importance of the child's identity regarding his family relations, and the importance of maintaining siblings together;
- make available to children and families follow-up support to face the complexities of such placements, particularly concerning links/contacts with the family of origin;

- ensure that effective mechanisms of active participation of the child and the parents, including the foster parents, are available (encourage the creation of networks for improved expression and understanding of the needs of the children placed in foster care and the foster care parents);
- ensure that human and financial resources as well as professionals' skills are sufficient and ensure the quality of the placement.

Nº30 – What do children and young people think makes good foster care? The first steps in an international study

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Objectives

Worldwide, millions of children and young people are cared for by services framed as ‘foster care’. However, while European understanding of foster care focuses on children being cared for in a family setting by non-relatives, Internationally, many different styles of service are provided under the title ‘foster care’, such as non-parent relative care, state certified family care, & small group home settings. Foster care may also be formal, semi-formal, or provided informally by an individual or community.

In 2021, 4,467 children in Scotland were cared for in formal foster-care placements (The Scottish Government, 2022). Formal foster care provision is provided by a mix of private, non-profit, and state-run foster care provision, with placements made at a local government level. This work aims to develop our understanding of what children and young people consider important in the provision of foster care, as well as to gather information on the range of services provided under the banner of foster care worldwide, and further refine the data collection methods to ensure that children and young people’s views and wishes are prioritised.

This work is the first stage of a multi-country comparison which will include Indonesia and Jordan in the pilot phase, with an ambition to roll out to 20+ countries in the future.

Method

This research gathered the perspectives of children in foster care services, and key stakeholders involved in the provision of foster care in Scotland. A range of different foster care provisions were accessed, and children and young people who had experience within them were invited to participate. Children and young people shared what they considered to be important in foster care and in foster carers. Participants also include key stakeholders

such as professionals working within government and non-governmental organisations, and alternative care providers.

We consulted with children and young people from the ages of 7-19 years, (or of an equivalent developmental age) in three age groupings: 7-11, 12-15, and 16-19. A range of interactive workshops were devised and used to gather data. 1-to-1 interviews were used when preferred or requested by the young people. Consultation with key stakeholders including front-line workers responsible for different aspects of the foster process were undertaken through semi-structured interviews.

Results

The paper reports on the most important elements raised by children and young people. Those issues that children and young people consider both beneficial and challenging in a foster care placement are highlighted.

Additionally, the paper looks into the outcomes that foster care services aim to achieve, and the support that is provided to manage provision of services that fall within this definition, and in particular, selection and assessment of foster carers, monitoring, and, crucially, the training and support that are provided.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research highlights the importance of improving our understanding of children and young people's perspectives, embedded in the socio-cultural context in which they live. The initial findings from this study indicate a widely applicable range of factors which children and young people report as important to high quality care.