

RELATIONSHIPS WITH BIRTH PARENTS

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Nº28 – Addressing multiple-family relationships and sense of belonging in open adoption

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This study focuses on the concept of open adoptions, a child protection measure which was regulated recently in Southern Europe, focused specifically on giving protection and legal status to permanent and successful foster care situations. In 2015, Spain issued a national law about it and, in Italy, courts adopted open adoption through the article regulating special adoptions.

Foster care and open adoptions deal with multiple family relationships. The child has to juggle between their relationship with their biological parents and their adoptive or foster family, with the risk of loyalty conflicts. Moreover, the child has to face a traumatic history and try to process a sense of dual belonging, to build a strong identity. The most difficult challenge is integrating the biological-procreative, relational-affective and historical-paradigmatic dimensions, which usually are brought from a single family; while here, they are provided by two, often, very different backgrounds.

The research design combines two qualitative traditions, case study and phenomenology, to understand the construction of a sense of dual belonging in this complex situation and how contacts with the biological family have influenced it. Due to the low frequency of this phenomenon, the participants were 9 adoptive parent couples, involved with semi-structured interviews. Moreover, 3 of their adoptive sons and daughters participate in the research process, developing Ondina Greco's "The Double Moon Drawing" graphic-projective test.

Findings indicated a uniqueness of each family's situation in terms of history, contact with the biological family and development of a sense of dual belonging. Adoptions with a higher level of openness and spontaneous contact between the two families helped their children to develop a sense of identity and to elaborate their history, integrating the present and the past. Some families with low contact or with visits mediated by social services wanted to increase the frequency of contacts and the level of openness. They considered that more visits with biological families could help their children to understand their origins better, as well as

face a mythical idea of their biological parents. On the other hand, adoptive couples that demonstrated a low level of cooperation and instead a desire to suspend contact had children found in the middle of a loyalty conflict.

All participants have shown the development of a sense of dual belonging of their sons and daughters, but they acknowledge the ongoing need for elaboration that this requires. Confirming this, the results of “The Double Moon Drawing” test have shown a partial integration of these two families, indicating that there is still work to be done for their well-being.

Finally, the administration should decrease resistance in allowing open adoptions and better explore its advantages in identity construction. At the same time, it would be important to rethink the distribution of resources, promoting family foster care and open adoption over residential foster care. Social workers should work to improve the integration of the two families, helping children to develop a sense of dual belonging. For the same reason, both families must be educated towards a process of cooperation and openness with each other.

Nº26 – Supporting supervised contacts between children in foster care and their parents in the context of a global pandemic

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Objectives

The global pandemic of COVID-19 is affecting families and children on many levels. During the first months of this crisis, governments in almost every country imposed restrictive public health measures, including social distancing for people from different households to minimize the spread of the disease. For children in foster homes or rehabilitation centers, this meant the interruption of physical contact with their parents for several weeks (6 weeks in Quebec, Canada). The gradual restoration of contact in May 2020 was also subject to strict regulation, which could change from week to week, adding to the already complex work of the child welfare workers (CWW) who follow up on these children and their families. In the context of adapting, to the pandemic context, an existing clinical tool to support the planning and facilitation of supervised contact between a child in care and their parents, we wanted to document the experience of CWW who must supervise contact in this unusual setting.

Method

Focus groups were conducted in 2021 with five teams of CWW (N=51) in the metropolitan area of Quebec, Canada. These workers were interviewed about the impact of the pandemic and public health measures on the planning and facilitation of supervised contact between children in care and their parents. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic content analysis.

Results

CWW raised various issues related to the organization of face-to-face contacts, such as the need to continually adapt to changes in public health measures, which lead to the

reorganization of contact procedures in a context where resources are limited and they must honour the Court order. Several issues related to the facilitation of these contacts were also discussed, leading to tensions between the public health measures to be enforced, such as masking and physical distancing, and the clinical objectives of the contacts, such as maintaining the bond between the child and the parent. There were also challenges in implementing virtual contact, particularly with babies and toddlers. Some also noted implications for permanency planning, as well as the relationship between the child in care and the parent. Benefits related to public health measures were also identified, such as calming some children whose contact has been temporarily stopped.

Conclusions

Supporting supervised contact between children in care and their parents in the context of a global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, is no small task for CWW. While the adaptation of the above-mentioned clinical tool was done at their request, they ultimately made little use of it, which raises questions about the best way to support them in a crisis context.

Take-away messages

- The public health measures sometimes interfered with the clinical goals of supervised contact, which should be considered in risk assessment.
- Some of the benefits of public health measures should make us reconsider why and how to arrange supervised contact for children in care.

It is important to think about how best to support the clinical decisions of CWW in the context of a global crisis.

Nº5 – What criteria do foster care workers take into account when giving advice on foster children’s visiting arrangements with their birth parents

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Objectives

The present study aims to identify which criteria foster care workers in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium) use to give advice with regard to visiting arrangements for birth parents.

Method

Concept mapping was used in this study. It consists of six steps: (1) generating statements to one well-defined question (“What criteria do you take into account when you have to give advice regarding visiting arrangements?”), (2) selecting unique statements, (3) structuring and scoring statements, (4) analyzing the data using multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analysis, (5) interpreting the results, and (6) translating this interpretation and generated meanings into policy.

Results

Three researchers identified 50 unique answers given by 43 foster care workers (step 1 and 2). In step 3, 32 foster care workers individually grouped together the statements that according to them covered the same theme. Furthermore, they were asked to indicate the degree of importance and the difficulty to assess for each response. Multidimensional scaling and cluster analysis of the 50 unique statements resulted into five clusters of criteria (step 4). In descending order of importance these clusters referred to (1) child related criteria (e.g., physical safety of the foster child, abilities of the foster child), (2) attitudes of birth parent(s) (e.g., predictability of the birth parents’ behavior, the ability of the birth parents to understand the needs of the child), (3) criteria related to placement conditions (e.g., the

opinion of the foster care team, external guidelines), (4) interaction with birth parents (e.g., the birth parent-foster parent relationship, cooperation birth parents-foster care service), and (5) criteria related to foster parents (e.g., the practical feasibility for the foster parents, the wishes of the foster parents). Foster care workers considered most criteria rather easy to assess. However, the more important criteria are (child related criteria and attitudes of birth parent(s)), the more difficult they were considered to assess.

Conclusion

An important task for foster care services is to give advice with regard to visiting plans. The criteria that according to foster care workers are important to take into account, were almost entirely in line with findings from earlier research. Identification of these criteria can help to improve and systemize the decision-making process.

Takeaway points for the audience

- Foster care workers consider no less than 50 criteria when making visiting arrangements.
- Child related criteria and attitudes of birth parent(s) are considered the most important criteria for foster care workers when making visiting plans.
- The more important criteria are regarding making visiting arrangements, the more difficult they were considered to assess.

Nº7 – Contact between birth parents and Flemish foster children residing in their foster homes during the first COVID-19 lockdown

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Objectives

Due to restrictions during the first COVID-19-lockdown, foster children residing in their foster families were deprived of physical contact and/or were forced to change to an alternative (e.g.: text messages, (video)calls, letters) and maybe a less-satisfying way of communicating with their birth parents. This study aims to assess how the contact changes impacted the psychosocial well-being of Flemish foster children residing in their foster homes.

Method

An online questionnaire was sent to all Dutch-speaking foster parents taking care of a foster child with a minimum age of 2.5 years that was residing in the foster family at the time of the survey. Eight hundred and eighty-eight foster parents reported on the psychosocial well-being (Brief Assessment Checklist for Children and Adolescents; BAC-A/C) of their foster child and the contact (physical and alternative) of their foster child with his/her birth parents before and during the lockdown. Difference scores for both contact and psychological well-being were computed by subtracting the total amount of contact and the BAC-score during the lockdown from the total amount of contact and the BAC-score before the lockdown. A positive difference score in contact means that contact increased during lockdown. A positive difference BAC-score means that psychosocial well-being decreased during lockdown.

Results

During lockdown, the amount of alternative contact with birth parents significantly increased and the amount of physical contact significantly decreased. The type of contact with birth parents during the lockdown was significantly associated with the difference score in BAC,

whereas the type of contact with birth parents before the lockdown was not. The difference BAC-score of foster children who had both alternative and physical contact increased significantly less, compared to foster children who had no or only physical contact during lockdown. Moreover, the difference in alternative contact was significantly associated with the difference in BAC-score, whereas the difference in physical contact was not. When alternative contact increased during lockdown, the BAC-score decreased.

Conclusion

The type and amount of contact with birth parents is significantly associated with foster children's changed psychosocial well-being during the lockdown. Foster parents who reported an increase in alternative contact (e.g., (video)calls and messages) between their foster child and his/her birth parent(s) during the lockdown, reported an increase in their foster child's psychosocial well-being during that period.

Takeaway points

- Contact with birth parents is protective for foster children's psychosocial well-being during adverse circumstances.
- The loss of physical contact during the lockdown was not associated with the changed psychosocial well-being.
- Alternative contact may be a good substitute for physical contact when the latter is prohibited as psychosocial well-being increased when alternative contact increased.

Nº40 – Competition between substitutive parentality versus biological parentality

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Objectives

- 1) Does understanding the measure of the foster parent promote and develop a style of co-parenting for the foster child.
- 2) Exploring how foster parents build the child's identity in foster care, based on his or her biological family.

Method

Research is a qualitative approach using the comprehensive interview. 12 interviews were conducted with foster parents, who placed a child in foster care.

Results

In the analysis of the data obtained through the interview, one can observe the tendency of fragmentary construction of the child's identity (biological versus substitutive) in which information obtained from various sources is combined, like a puzzle. There are also different ways for surrogate parents to write the child's story: to compete with the biological parents, either in an affirmative discussion about their own experience, or in a negative discourse towards the biological parents.

Conclusions

Even if it is not explicit, the discourse used by foster parents often discreetly promotes at least some competition with the biological parents, either by undermining the status of the biological parents or by valuing the personal efforts of the foster parents. It is a strategy that seeks to build a personal sense of caring for the child in difficulty, to emphasize the importance of their efforts to the detriment of professional obligations.

Recommendations

Understanding the importance of rigorous and specific training of foster parents in maintaining and strengthening the relationships of children in foster care and promoting relationships between foster and biological parents by building a process of co-parenting; Preparing foster parents for their participation in avoiding the fragmentary construction of the child's identity in the placement and even for supporting a process of constructing a fluid, continuous and stable identity of the child.