

Support, obstacles, and challenges on the way to adulthood

A Swedish follow-up study of former foster youth

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The aim of the study

- * To present an in-depth representation of former foster youth's experiences of supporting and aggravating circumstances on their way to adulthood, as well as how they understand and cope with these experiences.

Theoretical perspectives

- * A sociology of childhood, in which the young people are seen as active participants and subjects in cooperation with the surrounding world (see e.g. Jenks & Prout, 1997)
- * A base in previous research (e.g. Mike Stein, 2008, 2012)

Participants

- * A case study of five former foster youth, 19-21
- * Two boys, three girls. Placed in a kinship foster family , a network foster family, or a traditional foster family
- * From the original group of 17 young people placed in different kind of foster families when they were 13-16 (from my Ph.D. Project)

Methods

- * Non-standardized interviews focusing their everyday life since the last interview
- * Network maps
- * The Experience Sampling Method (ESM) – 'Beepers'
- * Previous interviews 2008, 2009, reviewed in retrospect

Results - themes

- * *Interruptions and disruptions in education delay independence in daily life*
- * *Stability and safety in foster care creates a foundation for the future*
- * *Committed and informal social workers make a difference*
- * *Informal relations in real life, put on ice, or on Facebook*
- * *Overcoming challenges as a way to become more mature*

Interruptions and disruptions in education delay independence in daily life, I

Present school situation:

- * Completed upper-secondary schooling, now as adult students striving for better marks to enter higher education
- * Still studying in upper-secondary school
- * No school-leaving certificate from compulsory school, recently started studying some subjects

Interruptions and disruptions in education delay independence in daily life, II

Delayed schooling and/or low marks depending on:

- * Feeling unhappy in their relationship with teachers or peers in school
- * School fatigue
- * Change of schools
- * Problems outside school; e.g. breakdown of placement, conflicts with parents

Stability and safety in foster care creates a foundation for the future, I

Ending of foster care:

- * Completed placements in foster care as planned
- * Breakdowns
- * Still in foster care
- * Still support from a residential home

Stability and safety in foster care creates a foundation for the future, II

Some representations of the former foster family:

- A stable place to make it possible to focus on school
- A safe place to be able to work through one's problems
- An image of what makes a 'good' family, e.g. through commonplace interactions

Kinship foster families are like one's 'real' family

In retrospect another attitude to the foster family after breakdown of placement

Quotations

- * Then they could sit and tell me bad things about my friends (...) Whatever I did it was always something to scold me about. Then in the end I couldn't manage anymore cause it was so damn hard (Ida, 2009)
- * They were good people. They had their rules; they respected me and I respected them, you know. They understood me and I understood them, or however you say it. (...) They weren't, like, you can't do this; they got me to decide not to do it myself. (...) They really wanted me in their family (Ida, 2013)

Committed and informal social workers make a difference

Social services are helpful, but also criticized

A few social workers are especially appreciated:

- * Available even after the formal mandate
- * Informal meetings with coffee and talk
- * Nice, listening, understanding, trusting

Informal relations in real life, 'put on ice', or on Facebook

- * Family members or close friends are most important
- * Some mothers 'put on ice'
- * Financial, practical, and emotional support from fathers and/or kinship foster mothers, relatives
- * A close friend or kinship foster mother to confide in
- * Facebook a lifeline or just a way to keep in contact

Overcoming challenges as a way to become more mature

Some demanding experiences since the last interview:

- * Travelling abroad, getting into difficulties
- * The breakdown experience - a kick in the behind or leading to frequent removals
- * School problems
- * Drug addiction – poor health
- * Mental problems

Strengthened by their experiences when they managed to get by – greater maturity. A condition was to have some kind of security in their social situation

Quotation

- * So I've put myself in situations that I thought were tough; for example I've travelled to France a few times (...) All by myself. It was good training. (...) Yes, it feels like after I'd done it that nothing was hard anymore. (laugh). Nothing can be worse.

Conclusions

- * The delayed transition to adulthood because of disturbances in their school situation makes the possibility to study as an adult highly important
- * Social services individual treatment is shown in the possibility to stay in care until school is finished
- * Carers' and social workers' engagement, openness, support and their trust in interactions are crucial
- * In retrospect the young people see the benefits of their foster family: as a steady base when needed, or just as a construction of a 'good' family

Conclusions

- * The young people's agency in overcoming challenges and obstacles led to increased maturity and strengthened self-confidence, though dependent on some kind of security in their social setting
- * Facebook plays a vital role in keeping relations alive, especially important when a "secure base" in family or peer group is missing
- * The striving for independence is intertwined with a need for interdependence on the way to adulthood, with varying emphasis over time
- * These youth are more like 'moving on' or 'survivors' than 'victims' (Stein, 2008), at the time of the interview

Finally...

Thanks a lot for your attention!