

# International Network Foster Care Research

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**Prof. Dr. Klaus Wolf:**  
**Research on life in  
foster care families in Germany**



# **Research on life in foster care families in Germany**

**By Klaus Wolf**

What I am going to try to do here can hardly prove to be anything but a failure: in one short hour, I want to provide an overview of research on the foster care system in Germany, not to bore you too much along the way, and finally to delineate our own research perspective in such a way that perhaps some of you, who are thinking along similar lines, might decide to engage in cooperation with us on certain projects.

I will look at growing up and living in foster care families from a specifically educationalist perspective and, to this end, I will first outline a model of the balance between liabilities and resources for coping with them. I will then briefly introduce nine important German studies and then position some of the results of these studies in the model and, finally, try to gain support for a particular research program on pedagogical processes within foster care families. The highlight will then be that my assistant, Daniela Reimer, will provide a brief look inside our laboratory.

First, let's look at the balance between liabilities and resources.

## ***1 The Balance between Liabilities and Resources***

The following model focuses on the relationship between tasks and liabilities on the one hand and resources for dealing with them on the other. Generally speaking, we use this model for the description and analysis of different topics related to social work. I will use it here for the analysis of problems encountered by the people who are concerned with life in a foster care family: the child him- or herself, the adult foster carers, the biological children of the foster parents, but also the birth family of the foster child and other important agents. The question is: Which difficulties do these people have and which resources do they need in order to deal with these problems? The issues, then, are everyday problems, but also developmental tasks that the child may have to cope with, and other biographical issues that perhaps the adults

may be confronted with. I will illustrate this with reference to specific research results a little later.

In order to deal with problems and carry out certain tasks, the people involved require resources. These can consist in the abilities and potentials of the individual people – the sense of coherence, for example, plays an important role. Then again, contacts with other people (that means: network relationships), professional counseling, sometimes therapy, even material resources can facilitate or alleviate coping with problems. To put it another way: the problems themselves are not the only problem. Only if the needed resources are missing do the problems become unmanageable. You probably suspect what comes next. Then, we ask the social services: Can you make those modest resources that people absolutely need to deal with their problems, but cannot find anywhere else, accessible to these people? I will also return to this issue a bit later.

Focusing not only on liability factors, but also on this relationship between liabilities and resources is a procedure that is widespread in both salutogenesis and resilience research. Thus, we did not at all originally develop this approach, but we use it because we are convinced that in this way we attain a relatively complex approach to the problems of foster care families and to the problems of growing up in such families.

I hope to convince you of this. We'll see whether that might work.

Here, I would like to point out one particular aspect. From this perspective, the focus is not so much on human disorders and ways to treat them. Instead, abnormal behavior is understood and decrypted as a strategy – perhaps as an abnormal strategy, often as a strategy with unfavorable side effects – but still, as a strategy for dealing with a problem. If we have not understood the problem to some extent, we cannot consider what the heretofore incomprehensible behavior means, and we cannot offer the necessary relevant resources which a child might need to develop less demanding strategies.

I would now like to illustrate this with a few examples. To this end, I have selected a few important studies from Germany. I will introduce them to you very briefly, and then select some results and position them within the model.

## 2 Empirical studies

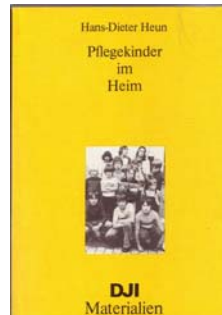
The first study is entitled *Pflegemutter und Pflegekind* ("Foster Mother and Foster Child"). The part under discussion here is by Lotte Danziger and was published in 1930. So, it is a somewhat dated study. I have selected it because it is one of the first empirical studies – in my overview the first large-scale one in the German-speaking countries that, in addition, includes quantitative and qualitative data – in particular, research on the motivation for taking in a foster child or returning one to the authorities (interviews with foster mothers and observations in the foster family). The focus is on the relationship between the foster mother and the child.



The next study, one by Jürgen Blandow entitled *Rollendiskrepanzen in der Pflegefamilie* ("Role Discrepancies in the Foster Family") from 1972 (nineteenseventytwo), is representative of a number of publications on the foster care system. Jürgen Blandow is surely the most important author on the German foster care system (it is perhaps a little embarrassing to say this in his presence, but, after all, we should stick to the truth). In this study, which also evaluates qualitative and quantitative data, he develops a, in light of its results, critical view of the motivations of foster mothers. He inquires into the factors that influence the success of foster care relations.



Hans-Dieter Heun's book entitled *Pflegekinder im Heim* ("Foster Children in Residential Homes") examines the causes behind the breakdown of foster care relationships, that is, it takes a look at what has happened to children who were looked after in homes after having been rejected by foster families. Heun is also concerned with how the children experienced their rejection.



In a book from 1994, *Besuchskontakte in Pflegefamilien* ("Visits with Foster Families"), Sabine Kötter examines the difficult relationships between foster family and birth family.



Richard Müller-Schlotmann focuses in his book from 1998, *Integration vernachlässigter und misshandelter Kinder* ("The Integration of Neglected and Maltreated Children"), on services for children who have suffered severe neglect and violence in foster families.



Brigitte Steimer analyzes 10 initial interviews with foster and adoptive parents who had sought support in her psychoanalytical counseling service center in her book *Suche nach Liebe und Inszenierung von Ablehnung* ("The Quest for Love and the Staging of Rejection").



Josef Faltermeier published in 2001 *Verwirkte Elternschaft? Fremdunterbringung, Herkunftseltern, neue Handlungsansätze* ("Forfeited Parenthood? Life Away from Home, Birth Parents, New Approaches to Action") and examined the issue of how birth parents experience the placement of their child in a foster family.



In a doctoral thesis completed at the University of Siegen and entitled *Kleine Paedagogen* ("The Little Pedagogues"), Alfred Marmann examines the experiences and the development of children whose parents have decided to take in a child.



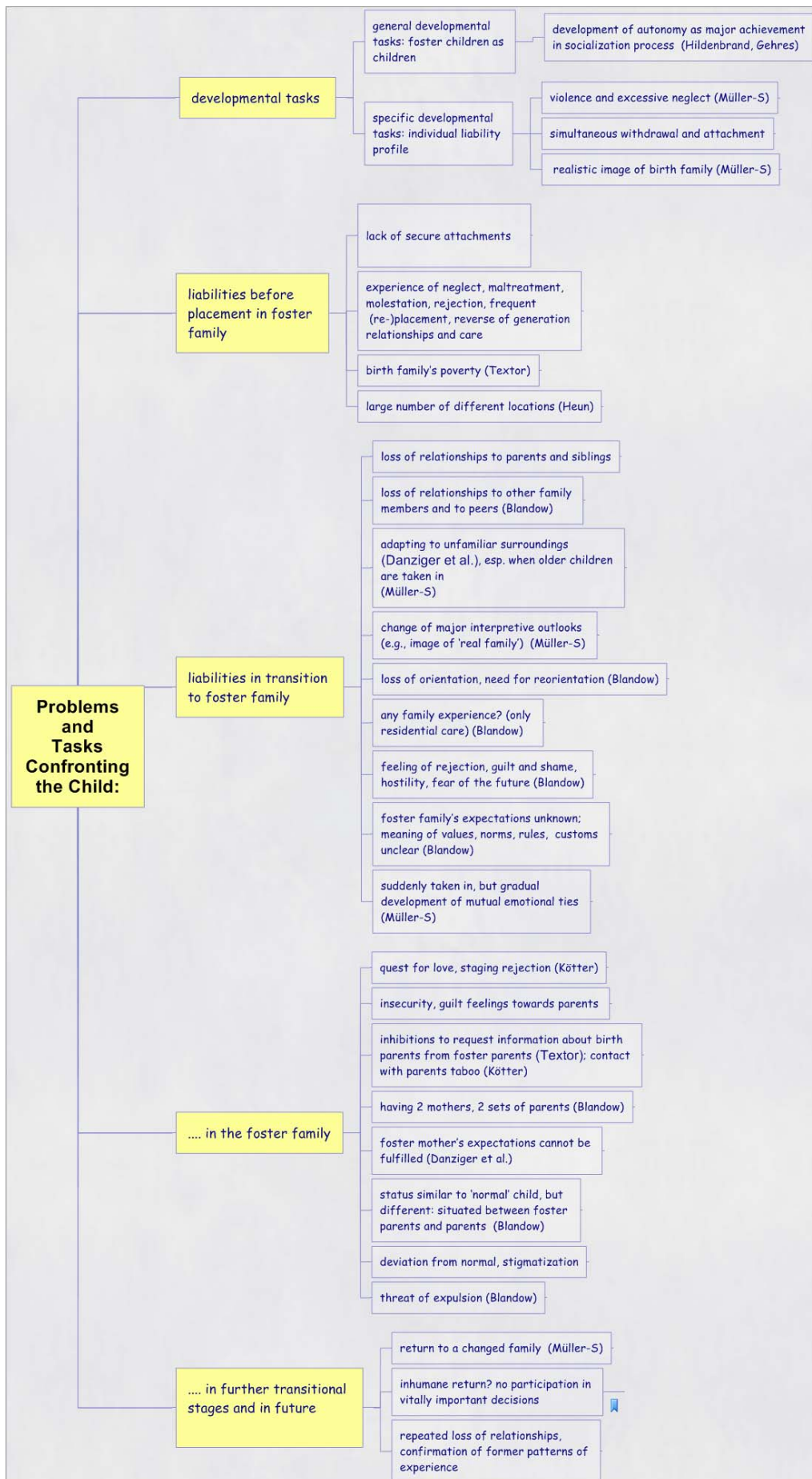
Finally, I will mention an essay by Walter Gehres on processes of identity formation in foster children. This is work representative of a research project conducted by Bruno Hildenbrand und Walter Gehres at the university of Jena.



Of course, one can criticize this selection and inquire about scholars like Dührssen, Leitner und Bieback, Heitkamp, Nienstedt and Westermann, or Irmela Wiemann. I have restricted my selection to explicitly empirical studies, most of them dissertations, and I would like to position some of these results within the model outlined above in order to point out that they can become interconnected and how this might be done. Naturally, this entire presentation can only be done in an exemplary fashion.

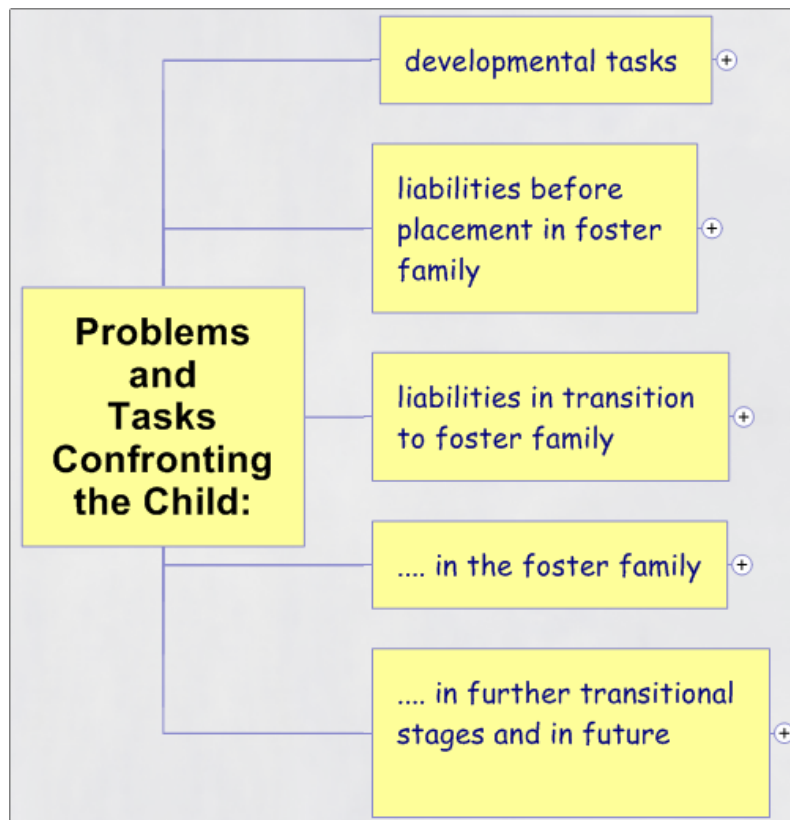
### ***3 Problems and Tasks Confronting Foster Children***

We should now take a look at the tasks and problems confronting a child living in a foster family for a certain amount of time. An overview showing only a few results would look like this.





Let's take a look at the main groups of problems.



Here at the top are developmental tasks. These are development tasks that all children in all societies need to deal with, typically human tasks with their specific modulation from their times and social circumstances. But among foster children, some of these developmental tasks take on a very distinct nature. For one thing, all children need to establish a realistic image of their parents and, as my daughters assure me, this inevitably involves disappointments. But for foster children, this is a task that is much more complicated to deal with.

At times without any everyday interaction with their parents, sometimes filled with tremendous expectations, sometimes embittered by disappointments, often enough feeling a mixture of both at the same time, these children are in need of special resources. Müller-Schlotmann has described how difficult it is for them to develop a realistic image especially with regard to their mother. This is not a completely insurmountable task, but certainly a particularly difficult one which they cannot come to terms with alone or only with help from their peers. One issue that becomes especially relevant to their development is: Do the foster parents offer support or do they intensify their dilemma? If the foster parents do not provide

support, are other people available who are helpful in dealing with this task, who prove to be a resource for this?

Let us now take a look at the other major groups listed: liabilities prior to placement in the foster family; all the topics related to insecure attachments, experience of neglect or violence, a reversal of the relationships between generations, as they have been described by Blandow and others. In Germany, such problems often involve a large number of various stations, frequent (re-)placement, change of location, breakdown of relationships, and so on. Heun, for example, has published dramatic statistics.

Here we have liabilities in transition to the foster family: an unfamiliar situation among unfamiliar people. Ms. Reimer is undertaking a study on such themes, which include anxiety about siblings' fate, loss of relationships and of orientations, the need to reorient oneself (as Blandow has described this), changing the image of what a real family is like (Mueller-Schlotmann) – to the extent that there is any conscious reflection on family experiences, and so on.

I suppose that you can relate many subjects and results of your own research to what is listed here or under other headings. Analyzing circumstances this way, we attain an increasingly complex image that does more justice to the complexity and wide diversity of factors influencing children's development than less sophisticated models would.

The next section refers to tasks and problems in the foster family. Here, I would like to pinpoint only one single aspect. With reference to Winnicott, Brigitte Steimer describes a strategy of foster children who have experienced excessive violence as a quest for love and a staging of rejection. She quotes Winnicott as saying, "Apparently, the child can only begin to believe in being loved after he or she has succeeded in being hated." Taking recourse to psychoanalytical theories, Winnicott manages to make a quite plausible case for this argument. Within a different theoretical context, Mueller-Schlotmann describes the dire consequences of experiencing excessive violence in similar ways. This aspect provides a dramatic example of how a child's desperate attempt to deal with the situation can cause severe problems for the foster parents. If they have understood what the child is attempting to cope with, the situation remains very demanding, but it does not seem senseless to try to endure this phase. This may provide them with new interpretations that can help them to develop the stamina to manage the rest of this difficult way with the child. Such foster parents can become a major resource for enabling the child to have new experiences and to give up

the behavioral pattern in which he or she might have remained entrapped by, for instance, being rejected by the foster family. The foster parents, in turn, are also dependent on resources such as professional counseling in order to be able to cope with this arduous and demanding task.

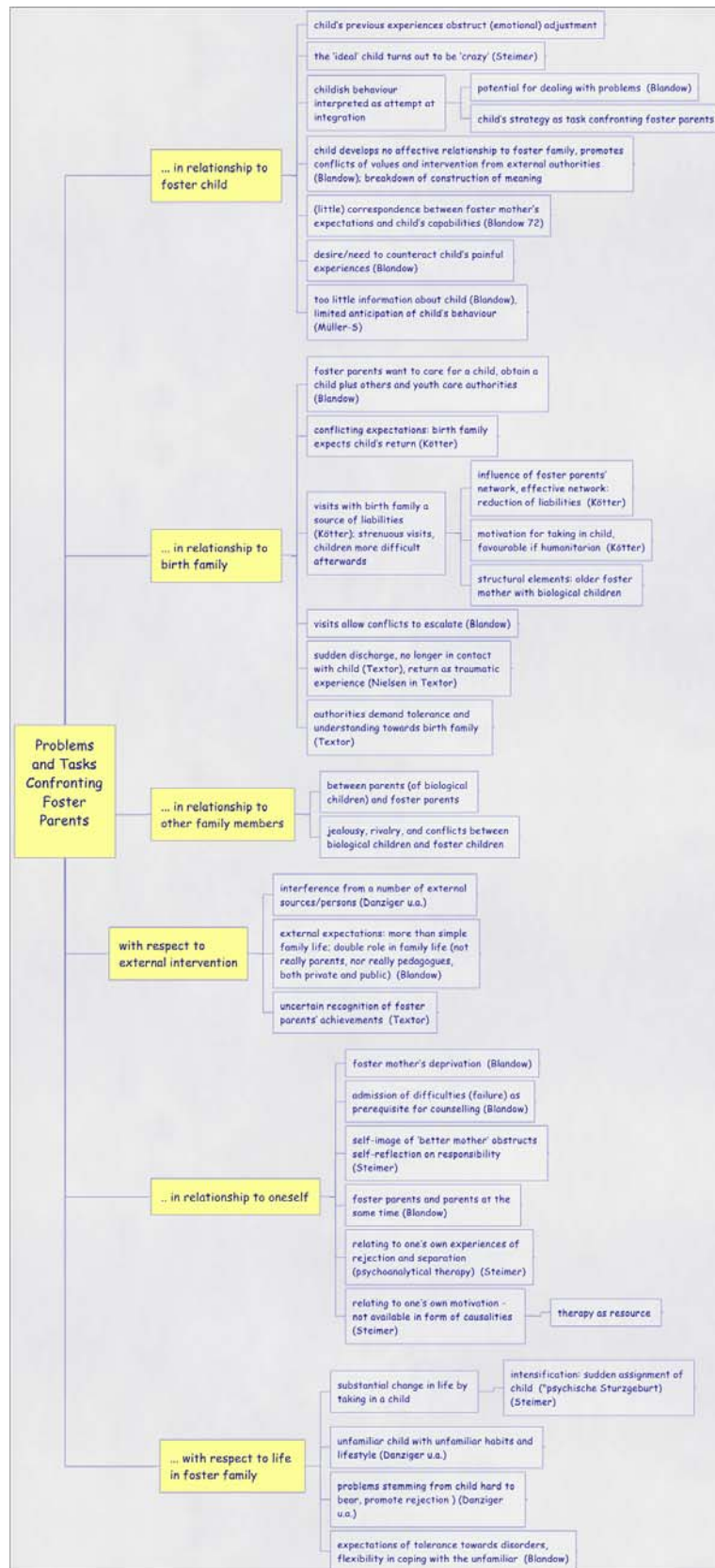
Just to briefly mention the last group of problems here: These relate to further transitions subsequent to the time spent in the foster family and to the development of plans for the future.

In comparison with other children, many of these children have some quite extraordinary problems to deal with. If we have understood the problems in a specific case, that is, which problems a specific child is concerned with at a particular point in time, then we can consider which resources are needed and how the child can attain access to these resources. Even though the foster family is a very significant source for such support, we should be wary of taking recourse to a socialization model (also in our research) which perceives the child exclusively as a member of the family and expects all socialization to be achieved only by the foster family. The family is not in a position to do this. And need not do this, if we conceive of the area in which we position the resources for the child as having a broader scope.

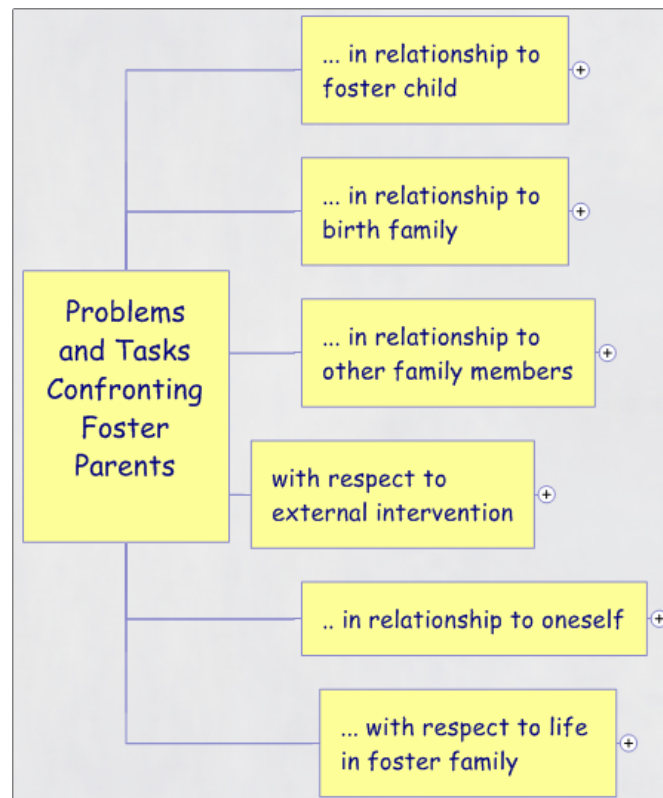
In a research project which deals with the developmental conditions of children in multi-problem families (Ms. Frindt is currently working on this), we are undertaking a systematic check of the ways the family can promote socialization and of where deficiencies might arise. In light of such deficiencies, qualified social workers then look for people outside the nuclear family who can compensate for or alleviate the problems. From a similar perspective, I would like to consider the difficulties that people in foster families must deal with – in what follows, the problems and tasks confronting foster parents.

## 4 Problems and Tasks Confronting Foster Parents

Again, let us first take a look at the problem areas.



These are the major groups of problems:



For the foster parents, the foster child is also a source of problems and challenging situations (hopefully not exclusively, but, instead, also a source of joy). But since, again, the question for social services is: “How can you help foster parents deal with problems?”

The relevant literature describes a considerable number of liabilities which stem from the child and lead to problems that foster mothers have to deal with. Jürgen Blandow, in particular, developed a very comprehensive picture of such problems in his expert opinion for the 5th youth report. Again, I will focus on only two aspects.

One of them was mentioned by Brigitte Steimer (2000: 130-131) (admittedly, this means that her work is somewhat overrepresented here). With reference to the foster and adoptive parents she worked with, she writes,

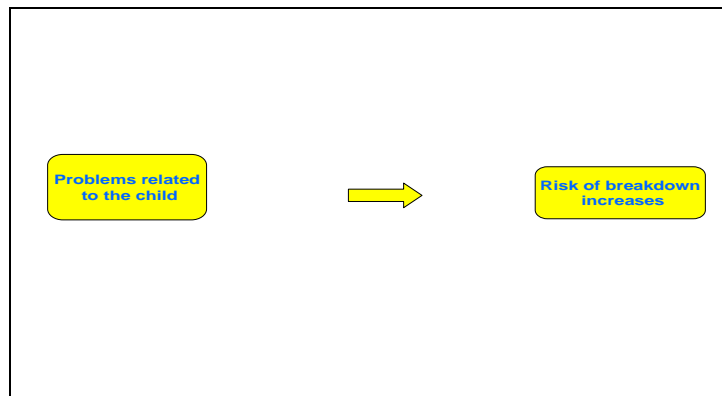
“It became apparent that there are often unconscious, psychological reasons why parents would tend to deny the difficulties they were having with the children for a while, as they were guided by the wish to finally have a ‘normal’ family. But if these conflicts can no longer be suppressed, especially in the case of children’s antisocial behavior, the usual reactions are

an overemphasis of this undesirable behavior and tendencies to reject the children. So with the same group of people under study, totally different results could occur in these two phases.”

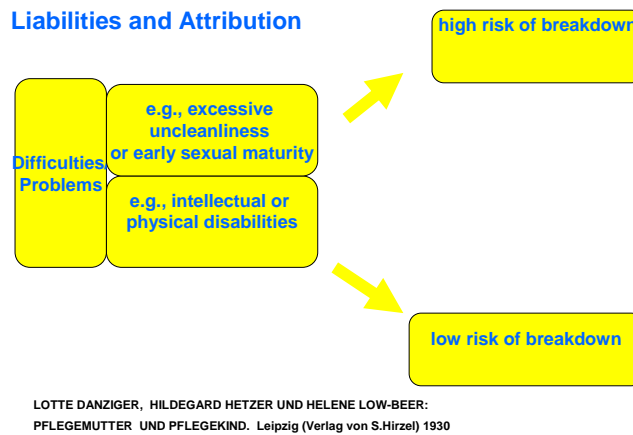
The difficulties involved in establishing a realistic image of the child become apparent here. If the desire for normality originally leads to (self-)deception, the subsequent disappointment is extremely severe and because of the strong tendency towards rejection especially laden with consequences. For some children, this process may correspond to a primary adaptive process during the first phase of care. Then, the net result of both developments is an accumulation of risks that can hardly be managed by either the foster parents or the child. This description of the problem also brings us to the question: What can social services do to prepare and assist foster parents that might help alleviate such escalation?

The second example has been taken from the study by Lotte Danziger. These scholars contend that particular problems stemming from the children make for a substantially increased risk of rejecting the child. At the time, returning the child to the authorities seemed less like a dramatic breakdown than like rescinding a contract.

I wish to represent this graphically in the following way:

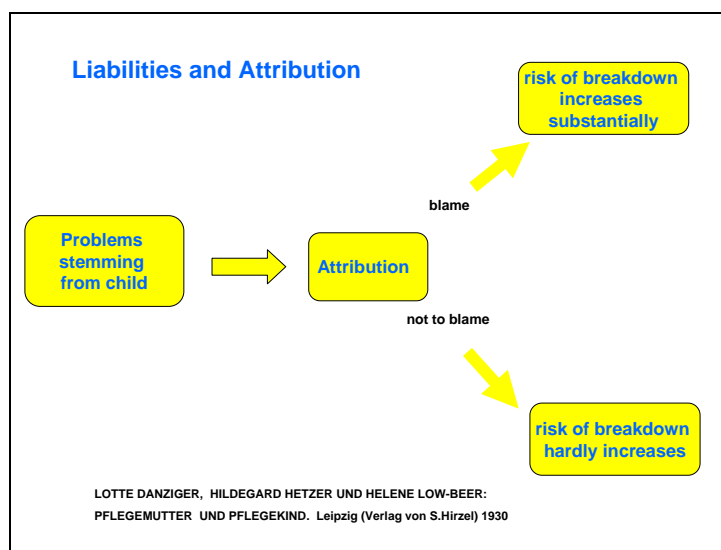


According to these researchers' observations, there are some difficulties which involve a significantly higher probability of returning the child than others:



In this context, they refer to problems such as the child being excessively uncleanly or exhibiting what they call early sexual maturity, whereas other difficulties are easier to tolerate.

The entire picture becomes more distinct if we take a look at the attribution processes.



If the difficulties are blamed on the child, the risk of breakdown is substantially higher than if the foster mothers assume that the child cannot have an effect on the problems one way or the other.

Thus, the report (1930:119) says, “As long as the foster mother puts no blame on the child for the effort he or she causes her, her relationship to the child remains a good one despite any burden she might feel. But if she starts to ascribe malevolence to the child, assuming that the child is ‘deliberately’ annoying her – and this sort of purposefulness is often mistakenly

attributed to the child – then that will be the end of the tolerable relationship between her and the child.”

Thus, it is not only the objective side of the difficulties that can lead to an intolerable situation or to what we call the collapse of the construction of meaning. Rather, interpretations considerably influence the capacity to deal with stress. If we wish to understand the microphysics of such processes, we must take into account this level of interpretation and of ascribing meaning, otherwise we are left with a collection of correlations between individual factors and a breakdown quota which can neither provide a satisfactory explanation nor facilitate specific forms of intervention.

The next major group refers to problems with the birth family. There is abundant reference to such problems in the literature. In particular, Sabine Kötter has studied this complex carefully and has determined which difficulties arise for the foster parents and often enough also for the children. In this case, I would also like to select a single context and present it in somewhat more detail. She describes how foster families with ongoing contacts between child and birth family often complain of considerable stress resulting from such contacts, yet can deal with this stress astonishingly well if they themselves are well embedded in a network of friends, acquaintances and relatives. The more flexible and straightforward the foster family is, the better are their chances to handle this kind of stress. Hence, there are not only interdependencies regarding characteristics of the birth family which affect the amount of stress, but also with respect to characteristics of the foster family itself, in this case with respect to how well embedded they are in network relationships. By the way, families embedded in networks also had the most intensive contact to social workers. So their candidness, and here, especially their willingness to have their data published, affects their potential for constructively coping with liabilities. We need to pay more attention to such mutually consequential, interacting factors.

Here again, I can only list the other major groups: Certain tasks also arise regarding relationships to other family members, especially to the biological children, and with a view to interventions in the family from the outside, and there are those having to do with the foster mother's or foster father's self-conception, especially issues of identity, and, finally, considerations of lifestyle in the foster family.

If I have indiscriminately spoken about the foster parents, I have been ignoring the fact that in German-language publications we find very little information about foster fathers and about



the discrete problems and tasks confronting foster mothers and foster fathers. Although Jürgen Blandow pointed this out as early as 1972, not very much has happened in this respect. But this does not mean that we can assume that such differences would be minimal; there are probably significantly different profiles. (Perhaps you can give us some further information on this.)

### *5 Children of Foster Parents*

In light of the time we have left, I would like to even more briefly point out those tasks and problems confronting biological children of foster parents and, then, those confronting the birth family. With the presentation of the selected aspects I would also like to already make a transition to the key element of the model: the analysis of interdependencies. (By the way, I learned this from Norbert Elias).

Alfred Marmann did a very convincing job of demonstrating how significantly the living conditions and developmental chances of biological children in a foster family change when foster children are taken in. Under such circumstances, it is not only the problems stemming from jealousy and rivalry described elsewhere that become apparent, but also strategies the children employ to establish a balance between liabilities and chances. A number of people have reported that by means of such experiences they had become more mature, more reasonable – little pedagogues, as the book title says. Yet, at the same time, they had lost something of their status as children with the corresponding advantages; even a part of their private lives had now become public. The balance between additional forms of stimulus and the liabilities involved was not stable. Parents who understood this task confronting their children were able to be supportive by, for instance, allocating set times exclusively to their own children. The more strenuous life with the other children was, the more important such compensation became. And as you may have suspected: allocating time exclusively for one's own children can also bring about new problems for the foster children. Ms. Reimer had an interview in which a former foster child reported how he sat in the kitchen with his brothers and sisters and watched television on an extra set there, while the foster parents and their daughter watched TV in the living room. Thus, the tasks to be dealt with are closely interconnected: one change here also has effects there.

Marmann demonstrates that the participation of the older children in the decision to take in foster children had a substantial impact on their willingness to help what was then a family project to be successful. On the other hand, taking part in the decision making also meant making a commitment. If things turned out to be more difficult than originally assumed, (if the new children were sillier than had been supposed), then there were restrictions to simply venting frustrations on others because the foster parents' children had agreed to the plan.

If we want to really understand what is happening, we must take a look at closely intertwined, mutually consequential processes. Like in a spider's web, a change at one place can trigger effects at a totally different place.

One last example relating to the biological children: Textor (1995:52) quotes a study which shows that sometimes younger children became afraid of being rejected from their families like foster children because of their "wickedness". Through the foster children, they are confronted with an issue that they had never thought about before and that they now need to deal with. The dynamics which can develop in individual cases becomes obvious if, for instance, feelings of anger and jealousy towards the new children are combined with this fear of punishment by expulsion from the family. If the people they interact with are familiar with or have some idea of this problem, the children can discover resources to handle and to come to terms with the situation; if not, they find themselves in the midst of a grave dilemma.

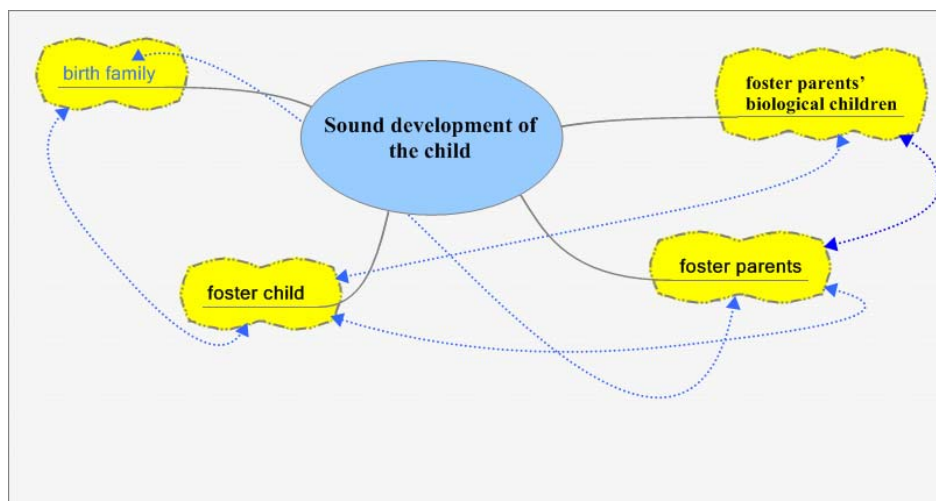
I am unsure that the general assumptions about the most advantageous age of foster children in relation to that of the biological children really provide a basis for orientation. If we more meticulously research the mutually consequential processes of interaction I have just outlined briefly here, we can develop a much more subtly differentiated foundation for decisions that is also of much greater prognostic value.

### ***6 Problems Confronting the Birth Family***

Finally, let's take a look at the problems encountered by the birth family, which would certainly have to be differentiated into problems confronting mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, and other relatives. Josef Faltermeier et al. have determined a number of factors which positively or negatively influence the cognitive and emotional states and the actions of parents when their child is taken in by another family. The better the social services provide resources

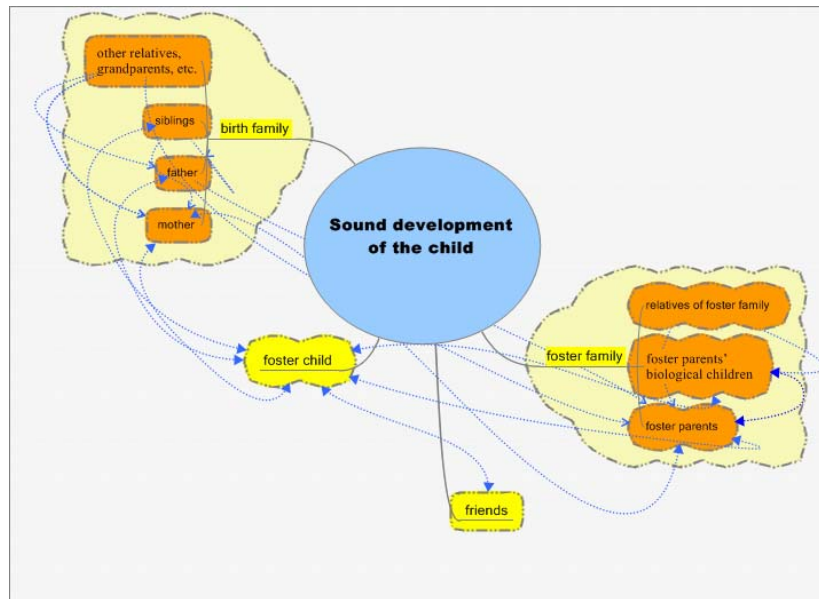
for these people to deal with their problems – hence, if the services abstain from moralizing judgments claiming that these bad parents had forfeited all their rights with respect to the child – the greater the chances will be to find more constructive ways of dealing with the problems. One result this study showed was that support in the reorganization of everyday concerns is very important for the birth parents. Considerations of the required resources for dealing with such problems should be accompanied by a detached, analytical approach which asks what happens when specific resources are allocated or not. Asking whether or not the birth parents deserve such help is a totally different question and should not be confused with the analytical one.

Up to this point, I have outlined certain aspects of the tasks and problems confronting some of the significant people who have an impact on the life of a foster family and have mentioned some of the resources needed to deal with such problems. The major focus was the relationship between resources and liabilities. At the outset, such a balance describes a system on the move: if the tasks and problems to be dealt with change, new resources become more important while others become less significant. Now, I would like to set this model even more powerfully in motion. For these are not, in principle, static conditions, but instead, processes, indeed interdependent processes. Let's first take a look at a very simple model.



The problems encountered by and resources available to these four sets of people impact the socialization environment in which the child can positively develop or not.

If we differentiate somewhat, the model will look like this:



As we have seen, if foster parents have an effective network of friends and acquaintances, the probability that they can cope with liabilities stemming from contact with the birth family will increase. If the birth family – for instance, through the support of the social services – has been able to manage their everyday affairs without their child and, in addition, has someone who is attentive to the humiliation they experience from the absence of their children, then the probability that they will substantially intensify loyalty conflicts for their child will decrease. We could continue in this way and can observe and analyze the interplay of favorable and unfavorable elements. Then, we will find some relatively stable and robust constellations and some that are endangered and very much at risk. With our present knowledge, I would expect the best results from such retrospective case studies as have been carried out by Gehres and Hildenbrand. Ms. Reimer will presently provide a brief explanation of a research project that we have just begun and of our approach. Our next step, then, will be to make use of the results of quantitative research (for example, correlations between individual characteristics and breakdown rates) for further interpretation, forming and checking hypotheses, and for reinterpreting the quantitative data.

### *7 Πάντα ρεῖ (Everything Flows)*

The study by Hildenbrand and Gehres demonstrates conclusively how important a process perspective is. In reference to a case study, they show how in the course of growing up the emphasis shifts between substitute and complementary family structures and how good foster parents readily adapt to the changing needs of the children. It becomes evident here that from a process perspective, even approaches which in Germany have been portrayed as mutually

exclusive alternatives (either substitute or complementary families) can be put into practice quite well in the same foster family at different points in time. If only one point in time of such a process is examined, this inevitably leads to the wrong conclusions.

Within the socialization environment of the foster family – or, considered more comprehensively, within the environment in which the foster child grows up – conditions are affected by individual people with their unique life experiences and their ways of dealing with such experiences as human subjects. There are, of course, certain typical constellations, and it is sensible to research them. Yet, suggesting that things usually work a certain way is not sufficient for judging the individual case that social workers are obliged to work on. The individual agents do not remain the same; they all change and develop – including the adults and their relationships (if I might quote the Greek once more: No one ever steps in the same river twice, as Heraclitus once said).

We can examine every task and every problem with a view to what intensifies the problem and what alleviates it. Thus, evidence suggests that a foster child in whose foster family the topic of birth parents is taboo – and several studies demonstrate this – can still deal with this topic constructively. The prerequisite for this is that the child has continual access to interlocutors outside the foster family who are not hampered by such feelings of rivalry. Whether or not these people are available to the child also depends on the structures and programs of the foster care services, for instance, on whether or not the social workers have established regular contacts with the foster child that allow the child to articulate these concerns. Reactions at the level of the program – for example, decisions on whether the service is exclusively one for foster families or also one for the foster child – affect the concrete interaction on location and in this way have an impact on the developmental chances of the child.

To sum up: We need a process model because:

1. the socialization environment changes and should change,
2. individual people interact with one another,
3. the balance between liabilities and resources changes,
4. new actors come onto the stage and others drift into the background,
5. effects are distributed across long chains of courses of action,
6. developments at the macro level trigger changes at the level of interaction.

For debates in the German-language context, not least Jürgen Blandow has again and again pointed out the complex interplay of many factors and, in particular, worked out the accumulation of liability factors. We must not fall short of these insights.

For this reason, I would like to suggest three general guidelines for research on growing up in foster families.

We should:

1. inquire into processes and interdependencies (as emphasized above),
2. take into account the constructions of meaning established by the individuals involved, that is, their experience and ways of dealing with experience, and
3. take a close look at the entire development of the child, in childhood and youth, not simply in specific settings. With such a biographical perspective, we should assess which resources the children require in order to gain access to their own disparate history.

In this way, we can arrive at models that exhibit the necessary complexity.

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