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Experiences of Biological Children whose Family fosters a Child

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Thanks to:

Network on Foster Care Research and the members: Ingrid Höjer, Klaus Wolf, Daniela Reimer, who helped us to develop this study.



Phenomenon of foster care

- As a different experiences of their members
- Different discourses of the interpretation of the experience
- In different contexts: culture, policy, history



Research context (Lithuania)

- Small research about foster care started in 1995.
- Topics of the projects:
 - dominate foster parents (mostly one of them) opinion about care and family relations;
 - few smaller: opinion of foster children;
 - any information from foster parent's biological children



Groups of members for research and practice:

- Children:
 - foster child
 - biological child (*mainly forgotten in the policy and practice*)
- Adults:
 - foster-mother
 - foster-father
 - social worker
 - mother of foster child
 - father of foster child



Discourses about:

- Childhood
- Parenthood



Goal of the paper

- Discourses of interpretations about experiences of biological children:
 - being a child as caretaker of care and love of the parents
 - being a child as caregiver for foster child, siblings and parents;



Review of research in other countries

- Countries represented
- Methodology
- Findings



Countries represented:

- **Canada:** *University of Western Ontario – A.W. Leschied, S. Roger, A. Cummings, R. Hurley, T. MacGregor, J. Nash (2004); J. Heidbruut (2004); R. Twigg, T. Swan (2003, 2008); C. Bruce & P. Bruce (2002);*
- **GB England:** A. Watson (2002)
- **Germany:** Siegen University - A. Marmann (2003);
- **Sweden:** *Göteborg University – M. Nordenfors (2006), I. Höjer (2001, 2004, 2006)*
- **USA:** D. C. Poland, V. Groze (1993); L. Cline (2005); S. Huber (2008);



Methodology of the reviewed projects

- Used heuristics paradigm
- Childhood research and interpretation
- Quantitative + qualitative
- Qualitative: interviews, focus groups



Grouping of findings

- Positive and negative impact of foster care to foster parents' biological children;
- Relationship among biological and foster children;
- Models of foster family represented by biological children.



Positive impact on biological children

- Becoming more sensitive, caring and empathetic, tolerant, impartial, future carers (Höjer 2004; Cline 2005; Poland, Groze 1993; Watson 2002; Twig 2003;)
- Better valuation of their family live (Poland, Groze 1993; Cline 2005;)



Negative impact on biological children (1)

- **Biggest burden:** sharing the parents time and attention with foster children – learning not to share feelings about this (Poland & Groze 1993, Höjer 2001; Cline 2005; Huber 2008)
- **Reasons** (Twigg 2003) :
 - 1) feelings of selfishness and guilty because of feeling neglected;
 - 2) feeling do not listened enough;
 - 3) inequality of love and attention (Leshied 2004).



Negative impact on biological children (2)

- **Foster child's breach of decency:** aggression, stealing, falsehood (Huber 2008; Cline 2005; Poland & Groze 1993);
- **Losing their place and role in their family** (Twigg 2008);
- **Living according foster child's time schedule** (Huber 2008);
- **Learn to much and too early about the social problems** (Höjer 2001);
- **Undervaluation of their active role in fostering** (Twigg 2003);
- **Separation and sorrow** (Twigg 2003).



Needs for discussion about impact of + and -

- Earlier matured (Cline 2005; Twig 2003;). Is it really positive??
- Spend much more time out of home (Poland & Goze 1993). Is it for better self-determination or risk situation??



Relationships among foster and biological children

- **Friendly** – became equal members of the families, happiness;
- **Caring** – biological children as educators and carers;
- **Aloofness** – too different, no interest to be together;
- **Revoltng** – not accept as members of the family, resent their behavior.



Family models according biological children (Heidbruut, 2004)

- Open boundary family – foster children accepted as family members;
- Survival: partial separation, as a expression of dereliction of biological children;
- Strong nuclear family – foster children never became a real members of the family;
- Probability family, depends on time of care.



Ontology and epistemology

- Epistemology of subjectivist interpretation.
- Constructivist ontology – reality - experience as social construction of interaction and reflection (Berger & Luckmann 1999; Burr 2000; Bourdieu 2003).
- Interpretative phenomenology (Patton 2002).



- **Goal of the research** – to reveal the experiences of biological children whose family fosters a child.
- **Taskes of the research:**
 1. To show the changes those occur in a family after an acceptance a foster child.
 2. To describe the relationship between the foster carers' biological children and foster children.
 3. To show what worth lies within the foster carers' biological children experience.



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Methods of the research



Qualitative research

- **Semi-structural interview** - as the main instrument for reaching the research goal.
- **Semi-structural interview questions:**
 - What changes have occurred in your family after the coming of a foster child?
 - How do you communicate with the foster child?
 - What have you learned from the experience of fostering a child in your family?



Methods of defining the target group sample

- 1) selection according to convenience;
- 2) the snowball selection.

The participants of the research - 2 boys and 8 girls (from age 13 to 19).



- Collected qualitative data were analyzed by using the **method of interpretative phenomenological analysis.**
- This research has been conducted during Social Work Master Studies at Vytautas Magnus University, from September, 2008 till May, 2009.



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Results of the research



There were formed 3 major clusters:

1. „The whole life has changed“;
2. „Relationships continuously evolve“;
3. „Fostering has taught me a lot of things“.



1. "The whole life has changed" (1)

The change of relationships among the family members can vary in several aspects:

1. Relationships among family members improve, that is: family members become closer, more open and more understanding of each other;



1. *„Now I understand my mother better, because I myself always think how to go around things and mother thinks in a similar way; we both talk about these things, <...> my relationship with mother has gone better“.*

Karolina, 13 y/o

2. Relationships among family members remain almost unchanged;



2. *"I think when the new child come into the family, relationship in that family isn't changing. It is not important this child has born in this family or not“.*

Aušra, 19 y/o

3. Relationships go worse, arises tension, and starts arguments.



3. *"When Victoria were in our family, we have fought with my parents and sisters a lot“.*

Lina, 15 y/o



1. "The whole life has changed" (2)

Decreased attention from parents can be extremely hurtful for the children.



„Only my childish thinking could not understand, that I would also have to share my mother; I was very jealous of my mother, it was hard to get used to the fact, that I no longer was as the only one who hugged her, and then I realized that not everything was as pretty as I had imagined it“.

Neringa, 18 y/o



The changes often occur in the surroundings of a fostering family as well

The family can face confronting prejudices and accusations that children are being fostered only for the money benefit.



„When people say, that families foster children only for the benefit of money, I get really angry and to such people I always respond: if you think, that we foster children for the money, then why don't you do that and get rich“.

Aušra, 19 y/o

The foster carers' biological children can hide from their friends and classmates the fact that their family is fostering a child.

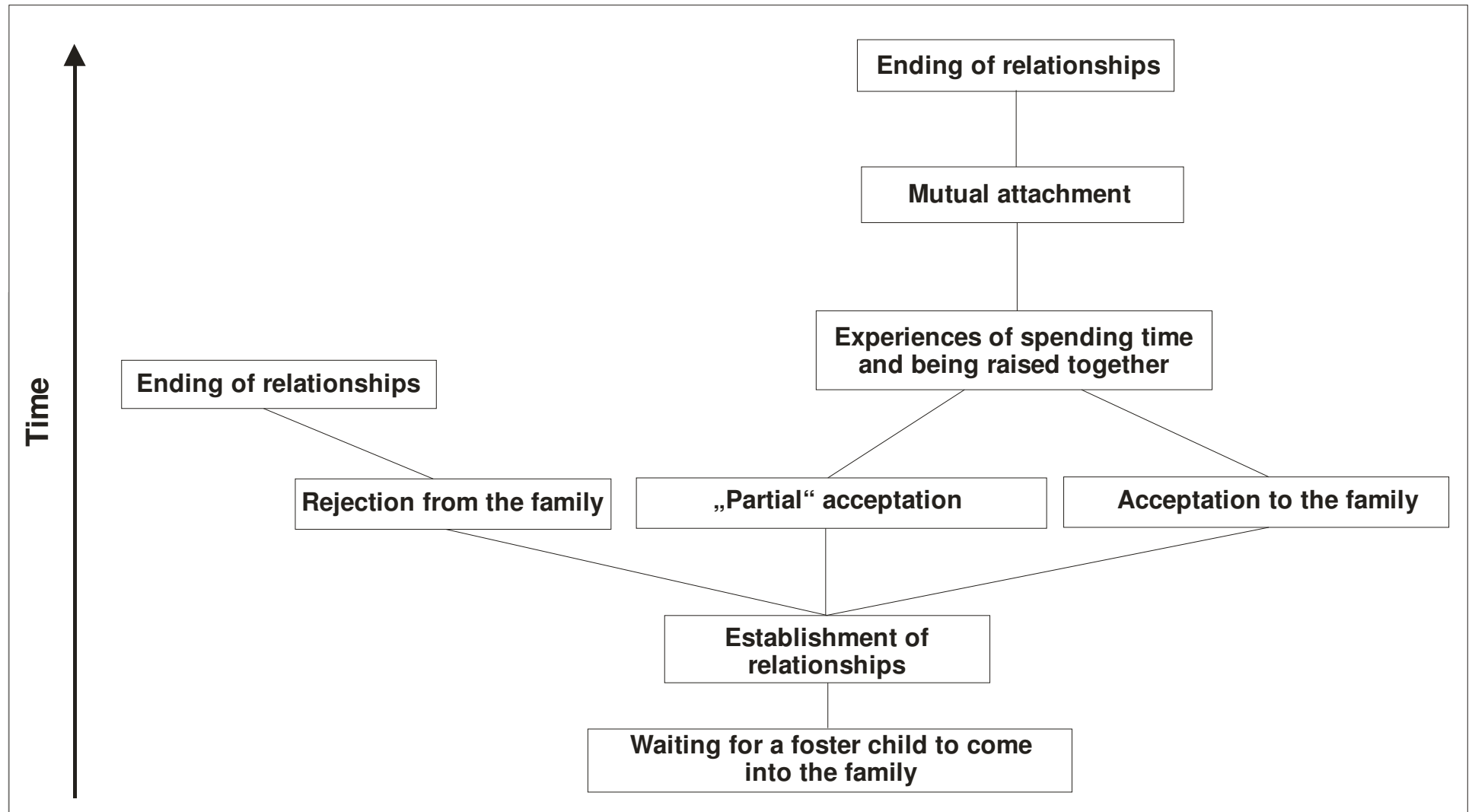


„To our friends it seemed strange; we were the only ones in our class, whose family was fostering a child. We did not even tell, that she is our foster child, we said that she is our cousin“.

Lina, 15 y/o



2. „Relationships continuously evolve“





Waiting for a foster child to come into the family

„I was so confused, could not understand what was going on. <...> it was somehow awkward, I did not know how to go around with these kids, I kept asking my mother how things are supposed to be, but nobody gave me any answers“.

Tomas, 19 y/o



Establishment of relationships

This stage can have three major aspects:

- 1) acceptance to the family;
- 2) „partial“ acceptance;
- 3) rejection from the family.



Experiences of spending time and being raised together

The foster children and the biological children, while growing together in a family, can experience both, joyful moments and disagreements.



Mutual attachment

Children usually get attached to each other.
Slowly evolves trust in each other.



A role of an older sister or brother

„I took a role of an older sister. I teach them, how young ladies should be: how to do the hair nicely, to dress up, we have beauty procedures, paint our nails – everything that all the young girls do. <...> I teach them how to cook, we do the housework together.

Aušra, 19 y/o



Ending of relationships

If the foster carers' biological children get attached to a foster child, they will go through difficult experiences when a foster child leaves the family. They can experience sorrow, loneliness, emptiness and sadness.



„When he left, I felt grief, a kid of longing“.

Skaistė, 14 y/o



3. “Fostering has taught me a lot of things”

Oftentimes, a foster care family is worthy for the biological children:

- they learn to take care of younger children
- to be emphatic and patient
- they gain understanding of various life problems that children have to deal with
- they learn how to solve daily routine problems and to communicate with people.



„I have learned to be a mother“.

Aušra, 19 y/o



Negative impact on the biological children.

- aggressive behavior of a foster child;
- negative views from the surroundings;
- long-term tension at the home.

Usually, these biological children will not be willing to foster children in their own adult families.



„When I grow up, I will definitely not foster any children; when I look at my mother, how much she has worried about that Victoria, I think to myself: why would anybody actually need all that“.

Skaistė, 14 y/o



The foster carers' biological children - active participants throughout the whole process of fostering and raising a child.

Biological children can be significant contributors to improving the foster care in their family.



What we have learned?

- These important topics, related to the life of biological children in foster family are:
 - The understanding of childhood and child rights: active, passive, innocent, incompetent.....
 - Organization of social services for foster families: user's involvement issues
 - Status of foster children and foster families in the society
 - Comparative research projects could be helpful to clarify these relations.
 - Situation of biological children have an impact for permanency of foster care



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***Thank You for
Your attention.***