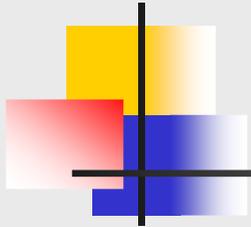


# Experiences of 8-12-year old children in foster care

A qualitative study

Hans Grietens, PhD  
Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care  
University of Groningen, the Netherlands

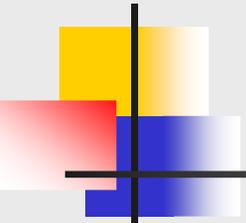




# Content

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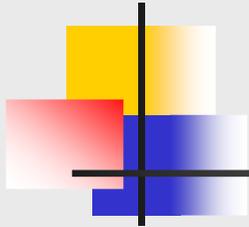
- Foster care in Flanders (Belgium)
- Rationale, methods and results of a study on experiences of children in family foster care
- Discussion (in particular of the methodology)
- Future challenges



# Children in the child welfare system in Flanders

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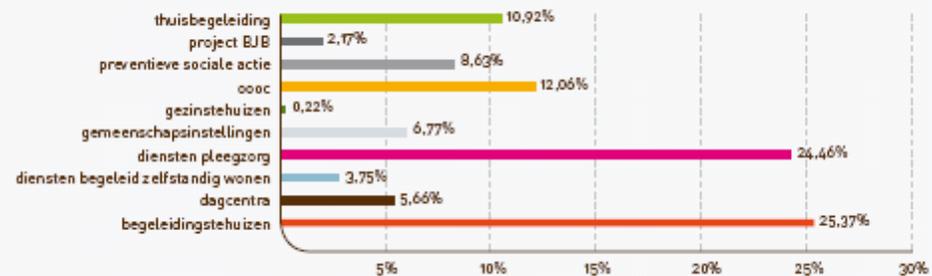
- 22.464 children in 2007: about 1.5% of the population 0-18
  - preventative services
  - (intensive) family support
  - out-of-home placement (about 66%)
    - residential care
    - foster family or kinship care
- Measure taken by Youth Care Committee (51%) or judge (49%)



# Breakdown of measures

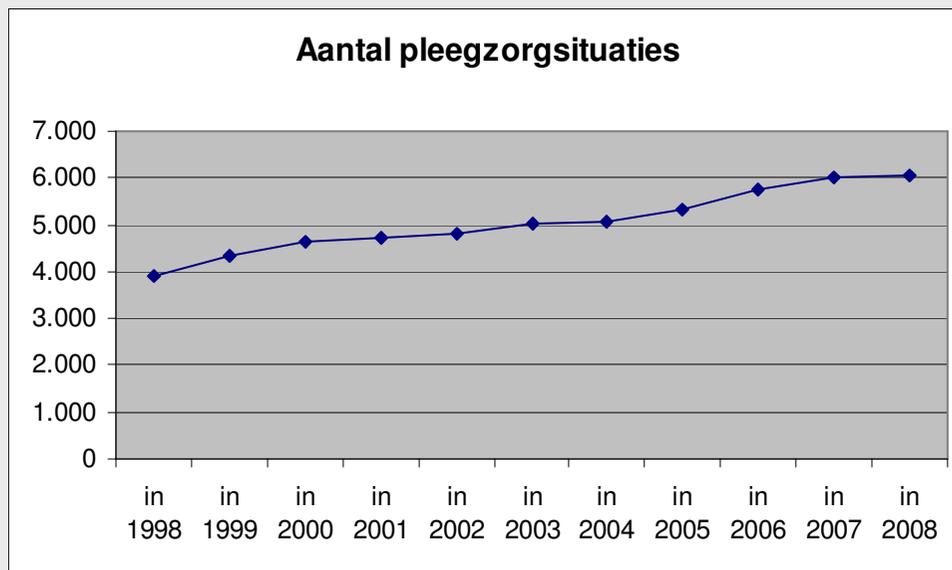


GRAFIEK 3.4 AANDEEL MAATREGELEN NAAR ERKENDE WERKVORM

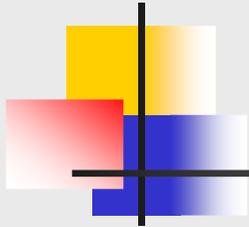


# Foster care in Flanders: some figures and trends

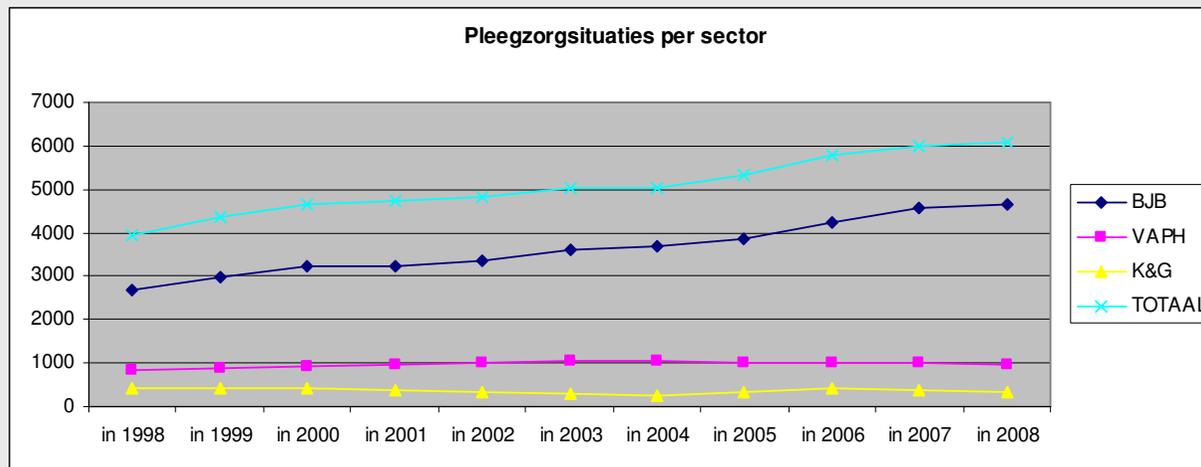
- Number of placements is increasing since 10 years

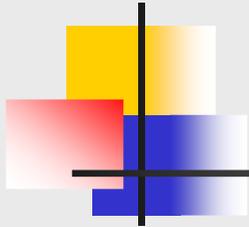


	TOTAAL	
in 1998	3.929	100
in 1999	4.345	111
in 2000	4.645	118
in 2001	4.741	121
in 2002	4.803	122
in 2003	5.031	128
in 2004	5.050	129
in 2005	5.315	135
in 2006	5.773	147
in 2007	6.008	153
in 2008	6.061	154

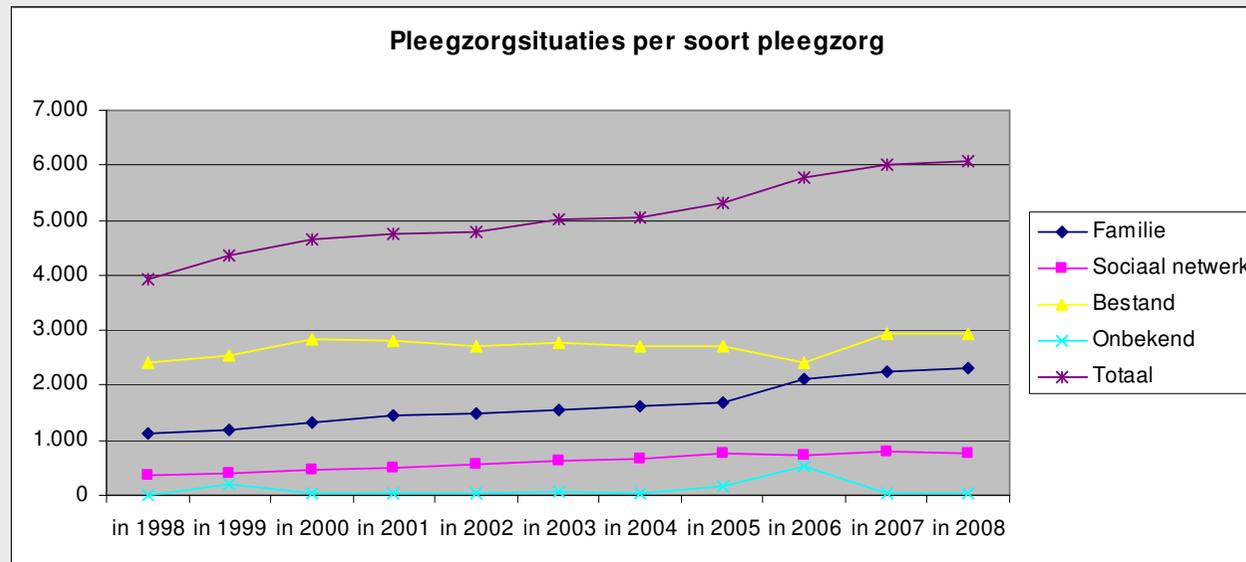


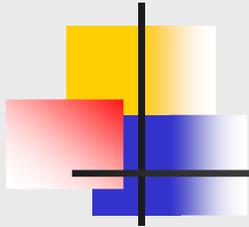
- Particularly within the child welfare system





- In foster family but particularly in kinship care





# Recent policy issues

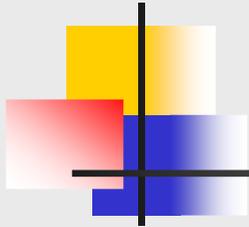
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*Perspective!*, Flemish Government's Global Plan on care for vulnerable children and families (2009)

## Initiatives with regard to foster care

- Family foster care to be considered as a major option of substitute care for children below six years, and the first option for children below three years
- Giving voice to foster parents
- Different forms of family foster care (from regular to specialized)
- Implementation of a training programme for foster parents

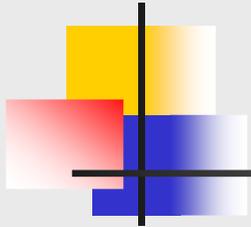
Giving voice to the foster child?



# Research aims and questions

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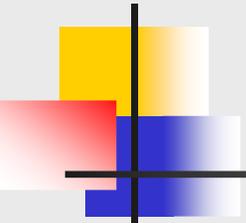
- Aim
  - exploratory study on the views of foster children (middle childhood) who are still in foster care
- Questions
  - how do they experience contacts and relationships with (biological) parents and siblings?
  - how do they experience relationships with foster carers and with foster carers' children?
  - how do they experience the transition to foster care?
  - what is their future perspective?



# Procedure

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- Target group
  - 8-12-year old children
  - at least one year in foster care
  - long-term placements
  - no kinship care
  - not only successful placements (random)
- 17 services contacted
  - 10 accepted, 9 participated
  - letter to foster parents and children



# Sample

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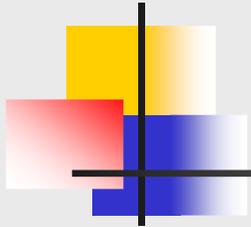
- 25 children (15 girls, 10 boys)
- Between 8 and 12 years old
- 1 to 10 years in foster care
- Number of siblings: 0-7
- Number of children in foster family: 0-5
- Reasons for placement
  - insufficient parenting skills (15)
  - relational problems (9)
  - financial problems (8)
  - child abuse and neglect (8)
  - alcohol and drug abuse by parent (6)
  - psychiatric disorder in parent (5)
  - other, e.g. health problems (4)

# Methods

- Semi-structured interview
- Sentence Completion Test
- Relationship diagram
- Emotion pictures



- Background information about child, family, foster family and placement

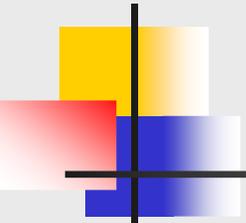


## Data analysis

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- Transcripts of interviews
- Coding, coding scheme and thematic analysis (NVIVO)
- Coding of the other materials
- Triangulation of materials
- Cross-site analysis

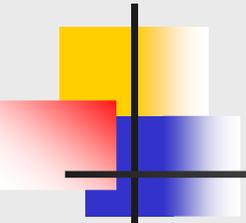
In progress is a re-analysis of the data, including within-site analyses in order to trace each child's story



# Main results of the thematic analysis (cross-site)

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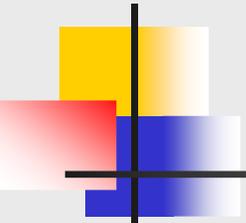
- Being a foster child
  - positive emotions (e.g., happy, good care)
  - negative emotions (e.g., confused, sad, anxious)
  - stressing the ordinary
  - explaining why being placed out-of-home
- Relationships
  - mother
  - father
  - foster care mother
  - foster care father
  - siblings
- The services provided (foster care service, judge)
  - preparation to foster care
  - first contacts with foster family
  - organization of visits to parents and family
- Future perspective
  - continuation of the placement
  - changes in order to return to home



# An evaluation of the study's strengths and weaknesses

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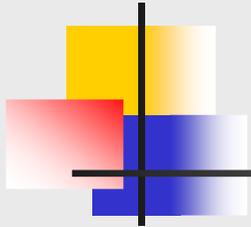
- Including the foster child's perspective provides unique information
  - about transition into care
  - about the services
  - about the foster parents
  - about how it is for a child to be in foster care
  - about how children cope with this reality
  - about contacts with parents
- but
  - what about recruitment and sample bias?
  - too little information about whether 'unsuccessful' placements were included
  - did we 'reach' the children?
  - did we not emotionally harm some children?
  - we tried to follow ethical guidelines but did not have a protocol
  - we did not report the results to the children



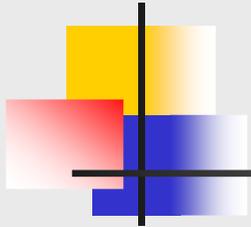
# Discussion

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- Methodology
  - involving (young) children in research
    - reluctance and many reasons for not letting children participate
    - does your request to participate reach all children in the target group?
    - who is recruiting?
    - is there an age limit?
  - reaching the most vulnerable children and communicating appropriately with them
    - can participating in research emotionally harm children?
    - is it always to the benefit of the child?
    - which methods to use, are some methods not too intrusive?
    - training of researchers is necessary



- developing ethically sound approaches
  - informed consent
  - privacy and confidentiality
  - reporting and dissemination of results



## Future challenges

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- Elaboration of the research method and ethical procedures into a protocol
- Towards research with instead of on foster children
- Including a 'hard to reach' group of foster children
- Experiences of children in kinship care