

## **What happens in the foster family?**

This question was the starting point for my research. Before I started working on my dissertation, I was a social worker for many years. The last ten years I worked within the area of foster care – recruiting families, placing children, supporting foster carers in their work. I find this area of social work to be most interesting and fascinating, and also to be a very important part of child welfare work.

The concept of *family* is much discussed – and what can be considered to be a family is also a matter of debate. The importance of the *family* is sometimes said to have lessened, much of the caring tasks within the family have been overtaken by society, and the “post-modern” family is sometimes described as nothing but a “social frame” within which the family members lead their separate individual lives.

Still, one of the most important notions connected with “children” and “family”, is that children need to be part of a family, living in a family is vital to create the necessary conditions for a child to develop in the best way. This notion of “the family” as something that creates good living conditions for its members, is also evident in the sphere of child welfare.

The expectations of the rehabilitating and healing effects of foster families on children from dysfunctional families are quite high. Foster families face a demanding task, namely the task of compensating a child for earlier disadvantages and traumatic experiences and creating a safe and supporting environment for a positive development of the child. The foster family is supposed to take on the task of supporting and comforting a needy child, and also to help the child maintain contact with its birth family. This takes a great amount of caring effort.

In Sweden 75% of all children placed in care are placed in foster homes, which means that 10 000 children were placed in foster care in November 2000. These figures also imply that there are quite a lot of Swedish families being affected by the policy of child welfare in general, and of foster care in particular.

Fostering has a great impact on all the members of families who foster. It affects the life of the husband and wife, and it affects the life of their children. Research within the area of fostering and child welfare mainly focuses on foster children and their parents. From my experiences of working within the area of foster care, I have found that the influence of fostering on the members of the foster family may have a great importance for the quality of the care given in the home, and of the situation of the foster child. This was the reason I choose direct my dissertation work towards the foster family.

What happens in a family where the wife and the husband are engaged in fostering? The aim of my study was to find out what impact fostering has on marital relations, on relations between parents and children, and also explore relations between biological children and foster children. A gender perspective runs throughout the study; what differences could be seen in the way foster mothers and foster fathers handle the task of fostering?

I will give you a very brief picture of the study. The population from which the sample was drawn consisted of foster carers with children placed in foster homes by local child welfare authorities in Goteborg, which is Sweden’s second largest city, and in five municipalities in western Sweden. The data collection consisted of two parts: A questionnaire survey answered by 366 foster carers, 192 women and 174 men, and in-depth interviews with 34 foster carers; the wife and husband in 17 foster families.

The foster family can be said to be a special kind of family, where parenthood, in most cases, is not based on biological factors but on a formal agreement between foster carers and local authorities. Foster parenthood is also different from biological parenthood in another aspect: parenting is shared with birth parents and also with local authorities.

## **Motivation to foster**

One of the features of the post-modern society is said for men and women to have a wish to focus on their own personal possibilities and careers. Therefore, in a “post-modern way”, men and women can comprehend the concept of children and parenthood as an obstacle – something that gets in the way of personal careers and the realisation of dreams. Why then, do modern men and women engage themselves in such a demanding and time-consuming activity as fostering? Why do they wish to take care of other people’s children, children who often have great problems and great needs?

In the answers of the questionnaire, the most frequent reasons for becoming a foster carer were as follows: a social interest, wanting to do something that is important for somebody, and a wish to have more children. There is a clear difference between men and women, it is mainly women who initiate the idea of fostering. 40% of women and 6% of men stated that fostering was their idea.

One feature, which characterises foster families, is a great interest in children. Living with children is an important part of the *life plan*, both for men and women. 34% of those foster carers who answered the questionnaire had no biological children living at home (this figure also include foster carers without biological children, 13%). In interviews, quite a few foster carers stated that one reason for fostering was a wish to continue being a parent and having children in the house, even after the biological children had moved out. Apparently, a wish for a continued parenthood is one of the causes for the decision to foster. Also, for those 13% with no biological children, fostering was a way to live with children, without having children of their own. For this group, fostering was a way of solving the problem of involuntary childlessness.

The concept of *care* is an important issue, and also something that is different for men and women respondents. Most foster mothers have an understanding of themselves as very capable and competent homemakers and carers. They seem to have a desire to *care*, and to use this specific caring competence in a way that can be really “useful”. Thus, fostering can be a suitable way for women to use their skill and competence as carers on something else than just caring for family members, by fostering they also make a contribution for children in need. Fostering may in this respect also function as a way to “professionalise” the caring skills – as foster carers women can use their caring skills in a context which can be considered to be more professional than only caring for one’s own family. Men do not give prominence to the concept of care in the same way as women do, and they do not express the same wish to use their caring skills.

In this context, it can be of interest to put forward figures which show that 62% of those foster mothers who answered the questionnaire were engaged in professional work in the social care sector, as teachers, nurses, social workers, child carers, etc, whereas corresponding figures for men were 12%. Evidently, a majority of foster mothers are both “professional care givers”, as well as competent “home carers”.

Motives for fostering can also be connected with the notion of *change*. Some foster families can be said to be families in some state of *transformation*. The woman, the man, or both, may have a wish for something new to be introduced into the family system. This wish might be caused by some kind of dissatisfaction with life in the family. It might also be connected with family structures having to be reorganised when own children are no longer in need of parental attention. In such families, fostering may be a way of experiencing something new, and still keep status quo. For example, the couple can go on functioning as parents, and do not have to consider new ways of relating to each other.

## **Parenthood – foster parenthood**

What differences are there between these two forms of parenthood? When I asked foster carers this question, their immediate response was to quickly state there were no differences. I interpret this quick response as a way to ensure me they did not treat their foster children in a “second-best” way. After having thought a bit, some differences became evident.

One difference is the *unpredictability* reported by some respondents. Foster carers usually know biological children and their reactions well, they can predict how they are going to react in different situations. This is

not always possible with foster children. Some foster carers explain this in a “biological way”: they feel like this because foster children have “different genes”. It is mostly men who give this explanation. Some foster mothers say it is because they did not give birth to foster children, they have not been together with the child “from the start”.

The question of making decisions concerning foster children is another thing that makes this kind of parenthood different from a biological one. Parenthood implies responsibility for children’s well being and also the power to decide what is best for children and what measures are to be taken to provide as good upbringing conditions as possible. To be a foster carer also implies to have a great deal of responsibility for a foster child, but at the same time it also implies a lack of control over what will happen to the child. In Sweden, biological parents still have custody of their children, even though children are in care. Therefore foster carers cannot make vital decisions concerning foster children; they cannot decide how and when children are to visit parents, how long children will remain in care, and they cannot sign important documents, etc.

Especially foster mothers seem to find this situation frustrating, some find it hard to combine their feeling of a great responsibility for a foster child with the inability of making decisions for the child. One reason for this being especially pronounced in the statements from foster mothers may be that motherhood culturally and historically has been connected with a great responsibility for children, and also that foster mothers are more involved in the everyday practical tasks of caring for children. Another reason for foster mothers to react stronger and feel more powerless than foster fathers do, might also be found in the general use of psychodynamic theories. These theories, which have had a great impact on the apprehension of relations between parents and children, emphasised the significance of how mothers related to their children. Mothers were seen as responsible for the “outcome” of upbringing to a greater extent than fathers were, thus it is presumably easier for mothers to see themselves as responsible for children, their behaviour and their well-being (Badinter 1981).

Foster children have often experienced neglect, abuse and traumatic experiences, therefore foster carers sometimes find that they have to use other parental strategies towards foster children than they did towards their biological children. They may have to be stricter and more rigorous and they may have to express their wishes in a more distinct way than they used to do with their own children. It can be more difficult to improvise and to do unplanned things. These changes may have an impact on the home atmosphere, which may become more rigid and reserved.

However, finding new strategies are not only experienced as a problematic factor, but also as a something that provides a challenge, and forces foster carers to use their creative ability and their great caring skills.

Many foster carers, both men and women, also state that fostering has forced them to reflect upon parenthood and what it is to be a parent, which is something that gives them quite a lot of satisfaction. In this way, fostering has reinforced parenthood, some of them even find that they have become what they call “more parents” – by which they mean that they have developed and strengthen their parenting abilities.

### **Contact with birth parents**

Important issue. Foster care is not only about taking care of a child – but also finding a way of interacting in an adequate way with the birth family of the foster child. Mainly mothers, but also fathers, aunties and uncles, and grandparents.

Different experiences – some had very good relations, some good enough, and a few had very bad relations to birth parents

All foster carers being interviewed are very much aware of the importance of foster children’s contact with birth parents, and they are also aware of the fact that their assignment as foster carers also includes the task of facilitating this contact.

Foster carers are aware of the importance of a good relationship with birth parents – “If you can establish a good relationship, half the work is done” – meaning that the situation for the child becomes so much easier if it’s two families at least are on speaking terms.

However, this awareness does not always make it an easy task. Some foster carers have managed to establish a good relationship with birth parents, whereas others have had difficulties of different kinds. It seems to me that this was something of a controversial question for the foster carers being interviewed. They really want to make things work between the two families, but sometimes they are both disappointed and angry at birth parents.

Initially high ambitions, lowered as time passes – foster carers feel they have to concentrate their efforts of children, and leave birth parents to social workers.

Research show that the parents – mainly mothers, fathers are often not available- of foster children in almost all cases have problems of different kinds. They are marginalized in many ways, and have problems of different kinds. Most important -- they have been deemed as inadequate parents, unable to provide good enough care for their children. Foster carers on the other hand, have been chosen for their stable lives, their ability as parents and their caring qualities – there is a big and very pronounced contrast between birth parents and foster carers. This social gap between these two families may be hard to cover.

This is a somewhat overlooked issue – but it can be of vital importance, as it can prove to have a great impact on fostering and life in the foster family. For instance, some foster carers told me how unsure they felt during visits of birth parents. How should they behave, what was expected of them as foster carers? What if the child called them “mum” and “dad” during visits? Would that hurt the feeling of the birth parents? Could they hug the child during visits?

All five new families told the same story. Uninterested mother, unable to play with the child, or to interact at all with the child. Easy to understand – hard to be an “unfit” parent visiting in what may feel like “the perfect home”. Very high demands on both parts.

As I see it, foster carers are to a great extent left alone to struggle with these problems. Foster carers should have access to good supervision and good advice in these matters. Here is an area of fostering where social workers and foster carers need to work as partners and develop new methods.

### **Biological children – “children who foster”**

In research on foster care, the situation of children of foster carers seldom is the focus of researchers work. When it is, the children’s situation is often mirrored through the eyes of adults. Pieces of research where children of foster carers speak for themselves are not so frequent. In some cases there seems to be a discrepancy between statements of adults and young people and children. Foster carers seem to think that their children mostly have benefited from their family being engaged in fostering.

#### ***Positive experiences***

Foster carers seem to have a notion that their own children have benefited from fostering, and that they are satisfied with their family being a foster family. In the questionnaire, 76% of foster carers reported their own children to be satisfied with fostering. 20% said that children have been neither satisfied nor unsatisfied, and only 3 % thought children had been unsatisfied.

One of the main beneficial effects from foster carer’s point of view, was that children could see that their parents have an engagement in other people’s well being. Children acquired an understanding for people who have not been as fortunate as they themselves have been, they got an insight into other modes of living, other types of lives. Foster carers wanted their children to learn how to be emphatic and caring in their attitudes, and fostering can be said to be “a lesson of empathy”.

### *Negative experiences*

Another side of the “empathy-lesson” is what can be described as “loss of innocence” (Term lent from Gill Pugh 1996, Adoption and Fostering). Children of foster carers learn too much of problems and hardship of children. They may learn about abuse of children, both sexual abuse and violence. In our discussion groups, children and young people have told us about worries and anxieties connected with foster siblings visits with birth parents. – Story of foster mother – two sons – sexual abuses foster sister by birth father during visits.

Foster carers described how biological children were upset and angry on behalf of foster siblings. They got angry when birth parents treated foster siblings badly and made them disappointed. One can say they got an insight in how difficult and complicated children’s situation might be. This insight is something that they would never have experienced if parents had not been fostering.

One of the negative experiences for biological children was decreased access to parental time. Foster children took a great deal of foster carer’s time, sometimes one can say that they absorbed all of it. Foster carers children were left with little or no parental time for their own problems and needs.

In the questionnaire foster carers answered a question concerning neglect<sup>1</sup> of own children due to fostering. 24% of respondents stated that they often or rather often neglected their children due to fostering, 31% reported neglect to occur only seldom and 55% that they very seldom or never felt that they neglected their children (see table number 4 in appendix).

In interviews, some foster carers described feelings of bad conscience, both towards own children and foster children, it was hard to find enough time for both parts. Some foster carers, especially foster mothers, reported situations where biological children were almost invisible.

Only 10% of respondents told of such conflicts between own children and foster children, that could not be considered as “normal” conflicts between siblings. When conflicts did occur, they were mainly conflicts concerning the concept of “sharing” – sharing things, rooms and parental time.

In interviews, foster carers also told of a changed atmosphere in the home. Foster children were sometimes used to a different set of “family-rules”, they were used to a different pitch of voice when being told how to behave. One example of this changed atmosphere was what happened when family members were having a meal together. Foster children may not be used to pleasant and quiet meals, sometimes they may not be used to sit down at all. As a consequence every time the family had a meal together there were loud conflicts and scenes, and instead of a pleasant meal, all family members went through an ordeal.

To sum up this part of the study, one can say that consequences of fostering for foster carers children contain both good and bad experiences. In interviews one might see a tendency for respondents to diminish consequences of difficult experiences for own children. This is not surprising; As a parent you are responsible for the development of your children, well being of children is connected with quality of parental skills. Foster carers feel a great responsibility both towards own children *and* foster children. If fostering has a bad impact on your own children, you have not lived up to the expected parental obligations. If you are to quit fostering because of biological children, you do not live up to foster parent obligations. This is a kind of situation that might be hard for foster carers to handle. It seems to be more difficult for women than for men, a hypothetical reason for this might be that women feel themselves to be more responsible for children’s development, the “outcome of upbringing”, than men do (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten 1997, Halldén, 1984).

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<sup>1</sup> Neglect” is a “serious” word in this context, it has got a connotation of severe carelessness and parental failure. However, this was the word found to be most useful, and results are to be interpreted with this connotation in mind.

## **Children who foster**

In interviews some respondents described how “useful” their children were. In many ways, they contributed to fostering. They could serve as “an example” when it came to how to behave in different situations. They could facilitate foster children’s introduction in school, and among friends. Some times biological children also took a tangible part in foster care by “baby-sitting” and taking on different tasks concerning foster children. Some foster carers acknowledged the participation of their children, and appreciated what they did. However, this was not always the case. Children of foster carers may take a great part of fostering without being given any credit for their efforts.

This is also something we have found in our group interviews with children who foster. One of the main findings from these interviews is the great responsibility these children take for foster siblings. Children of foster carers are often taking an active part in fostering, acting on their own on behalf of their foster siblings. This is something that really needs to be acknowledged.

In discussion groups obvious how much they cared for foster siblings, worried and took different kinds of responsibilities.

Sometimes children of foster carers seem to be invisible. I must admit that during the time I worked as a social worker with foster families and foster children, I often paid far too little attention to foster carers own children. Both professional childcare workers and foster carers need to be more aware of the situation of “children who foster”.

## **Foster care and marital relations**

Foster families usually have a traditional way of organising their everyday life, where women have the main responsibility for housework and caring for children. Men often see themselves as providers, and as responsible for other areas, such as working on the house and in the garden.

## **Impact of fostering on relationship with partner**

Most foster carers have lived together for a long time, their relations can be described as strong and stable. Many foster carers also stated that this is a necessary condition for coping with fostering. Good relations between spouses – many husbands are really praising their wives, they appreciate their skills as carers and homemakers.

As earlier mentioned, caring for foster children is a demanding task, which is both time- and energy consuming. Therefore, foster carers need to have a strong relation that can endure the strains caused by problems, which might occur due to fostering. Fostering can make carers tired, and make them feel that they do not have time for anything else but to satisfy the needs of foster children. However, even though several carers mentioned such feelings of exhaustion and lack of time, there were few that actually complained.

When asked about the impact of fostering on relationship with partner, 54% of those who answered the questionnaire stated that fostering had had a positive impact. 40% stated that fostering did not have any impact, and only 6% thought it have had a negative impact.

One of the factors described as rewarding was an *increased closeness* between man and woman. More women than men reported their satisfaction with this change. Fostering had forced men and women to *talk* to each other. To be able to cope as foster carers, they had to talk about emotional matters, about how they *felt* in certain situations. Several women stated that this was something they as a couple had not done before, and they found it most satisfying. Apparently, they had had a wish, conscious or unconscious, of an emotionally closer relationship with their partner and fostering made that wish come true. Some women said that old feelings of discontent had come to the surface and been the subject of discussion, which had improved the relationship between the spouses.

Foster families often have a traditional way of organising their everyday life, where the woman resides in *the centre* of the family. From this position she distributes those different aspects of *care* which are needed to keep members of the family fed, clothed and emotionally satisfied, so they can cope and function in society (Holter & Aarseth 1993). In many of the interviewed families, the woman had been quite solitary in this position, as long as the family was an “ordinary” family. The foster father might have been engaged in household work and childcare to some extent, but the woman was definitely in charge of that area, she was the one who supervised it all. However, when the couple became foster carers, the situation in some of the families changed. Fostering is such a demanding task that it requires the commitment of both the foster mother and the foster father. When men became foster fathers, it seems that they also became more engaged in caring for children than they were as fathers to their own children. Thus, the foster father was drawn into the centre of the family, one can say that through fostering the position in the centre was divided between man and woman. Women seemed to be more satisfied than men with this shared position, they enjoyed sharing the caring activities with their partner.

Coltrane (1996) describes how men who participated in household work and caring for children on the same conditions as women, also gained another form of awareness and another way of thinking about household work and childcare. They became more “like women”, they focused more on the children and their needs, and this had a positive impact on relations with partner, and family life as a whole. This is what seems to happen in some of the families in the study. Some foster fathers stated that they were more involved in the care of foster children than they had been in the care of their biological children, a fact which sometimes gave them a bad conscience.

The need for talking and discussing emotional matters, also made both men and women *reflect* upon aspects of partner relations, and parenthood. Some of the men and women being interviewed said that this strengthened their parenthood and their partnership, and that it had given them a more sensitive ear towards the feelings of their partner.

## **Conclusion**

The initiative to become foster carers usually comes from the woman, who in many cases has a wish to use her caring competence on something that will be of use for a child who is in need of such caring skills. Fostering can also fulfil the carers need of a change in the family structure, and a need for living with children if the couple have no children of their own, or if their biological children have moved out.

One might say that through fostering men and women become engaged in a “joint venture” – a kind of teamwork where both partners are working towards a mutual goal. This partnership increases the closeness between the couple, and can be said to be one of the rewarding parts of fostering. Even though fostering mainly is initiated by women, men eventually become more engaged as foster carers. This commitment can make them more involved in the “inner life” of the family, an involvement which is appreciated by their partners. These rewarding parts of fostering seem to make up for tiredness and lack of time – most foster carers say that fostering have improved their family life. It is not easy to be a foster carer, but fostering presents a kind of challenge, which most carers find to be rewarding.

## **Conclusions**

Important – concepts of care. Lacking in postmodern society, but not in the foster family. Often a surplus of care – foster mothers describe themselves as competent carers. Caring also performed by men and children.

Fostering presents a challenge to the notion that biological ties are essential for close relations with children. Foster families represent a kind of family where care is given without biological ties.

Foster care is in many cases experienced as a great challenge. Although it can be tiresome and exhausting, it is also rewarding. Foster carers enjoy the close relationship with foster children, and they also find it satisfying to use their caring skills, and also to develop and strengthen them in the process of fostering.

What about the future? Foster care is an important part of Child Welfare in many western countries. If care is said to be wanting in modern families – will there be room for foster care – a really care-consuming activity? Caring also performed by women – modern women are working outside of home – will they choose to be foster carers?

Many questions – I don't have any real answers – but some ideas:

I think most human beings need to be needed, and that they profit from the kind of challenge fostering offer. Fostering implies a great effort, but also a possibility to learn a lot about human lives and human relations, and furthermore a possibility for personal growth and development.

One way to proceed in the future would be to strengthen the satisfying parts – using caring skills, feelings of doing something important – and to clarify what the assignment is about, to give carers appropriate tools to perform their caring work. Making foster carers partners in a caring team consisting of social workers, psychologists, birth parents, relatives could make fostering more attractive even to modern families.