

Meaning of the family for children from child-care institutions

The interest in the topic as a research area was connected with the current situation in Russia and in republic of Karelia particularly. The increasing number of huge state care institutions is a dangerous sign for modern Russia.

Approximately three quarters of a million children in Russia are abandoned or orphaned. Exact statistical data regarding the number of neglected children is obviously impossible to collect due to the fact that such category of children lacks clear formal attributes – the majority of those children have parents, are registered at the place of residence and go to school. But all that exists on paper only.

In 2001, in Karelia among 170 905 children there were 6709 orphaned children and children deprived of parental care. There are 24 state care institutions for children in Karelia, 1778 children from 3 to 18 live there at present. Of those the "physical" orphans, i.e. children whose parents died, constitute about 20%, while the rest are the so-called social orphans. Their parents' alcoholism and, as a consequence, the cruel treatment of children in the families, with their needs and interests ignored, is one of the basic reasons for the increase in their number.

Now there are debates about what is better for a child – to live with their birth parents who do not provide for adequate development and education of their children, or to be placed into a foster family or into a care institution. Foster care is not widespread in Russia at present. So for a significant group of vulnerable, older, looked after children for whom return home or adoption is not achievable, a care institution may be the only chance they will have for a relatively stable and secure life.

It was for this reason that we felt there was a need to focus on these children to develop an understanding of how children from care institutions perceive their situation.

We started this research in 2001 with my colleagues from the faculty of education Karelian state pedagogical university. Our research was aimed at obtaining children's opinion about different forms of care and what their ideal for care is.

Thus, we got information on how children, currently living in state institutions feel about family, and if family is something they miss most.

We discovered 4 things from reviewing the literature for our study.

- The researches on children from care institutions concern mostly their cognitive development.
- There are hardly any research concerning emotional sphere and inner world of children from care institutions.
- The feelings of the children from care institutions are not understood well.
- There is no empirical evidence describing what the family means for those children.

In our study we used qualitative methods. At the first phase of the study we tried to find out what kind of life values, plans for the future children from care institutions had. Which place (if any) had a family in the structure of values, what ideal of the family they had.

As our research object we took 50 teenagers from 14-15 from a state care institution in Sortavala. We realize that such a small sample size would not let us claim that it is necessarily representative of all children from state institutions. But it seems to be a sufficiently large group for us to begin examining their values and views upon family.

The methods of open sentences and free descriptions have been used. Contrary to expectations the available data do not show that family is the most desirable thing for children from care institutions. They give the priority to some material things they would like to have or acquire. Only 20% of teenagers think of a family as the most important issue in their life.

We also asked children to describe what an ideal family means for them. Analysing the results we manage to point out 5 topics:

1. Family income.
2. Parents-children relationships.
3. Husband-wife relationships.
4. Family health.
5. The number of family members.

1. topic 100% children reported that family should have a stable income. For 60% it means having enough money to buy food.

2. topic Parents-children relationships. 80% of children described the ideal relationships as friendly and respectful. Some of them gave more detailed picture of that: 64% of the children considered friendly relationships without abuse. For 12% it meant celebrating something together with the parents without drinking alcohol and smoking.

3. topic It concerned husband-wife relationships. 76 % of children thought that husband and wife shouldn't fight and scold each other.

4. topic Family health appeared to be an important issue for 72%. For them it means the absence of alcohol in the family. These children wished their parents stopped drinking.

5. topic 40% of the children pointed out that the number of family members should include parents, grandparents, two or more children.

Thus, according to the data we can make a conclusion that children from care institutions have a generalized picture of an ideal family as a big and friendly one. But the image of the family is rather poor, not detailed. It contains the idea of non-drinking parents who don't abuse the children and each other. Besides, family doesn't appear to be the most important value in their life. Apparently it may result in difficulties in forming families of their own, in creating trusting relationships within their own families.

These findings lead us to a new issue – what children from state institutions think of different forms of care, whether they want to be placed into their birth family, what they think about being in the family, whether they miss the family most of all.

Before I speak about this phase of our research, I'd like to offer a short video about one of the state care institutions in Petrozavodsk. It's a typical care institution for Karelia, 106 children from 6 to 17 years of age (100 are social orphans) live here. Some of them have already spent here 7 or 8 years.

The background of the children is similar – lifetime of abuse, neglect, abandonment and extreme poverty within their birth families.

In this institution they found support, caring social workers and pedagogues, friends. They go to school and have the possibility to practice different kind of activities after the lessons. But we wanted to ask those children if they are happy with such life, if they want to change it, what their perception of the situation is. To research this area we used interview. We interviewed 10 children: 8 girls and 2 boys of 15 years of age.

We transcribed the interviews, read and reread the transcripts. We used analytic induction to organize and categorize information while we were searching for themes and patterns in the interview.

Meaning of the family theme arose 4 topics:

1. Perception of the birth family.
2. The meaning of a family as various kind of support.
3. Perception of different forms of care.
4. Perception of their future family.

Once again let me stress that I'm going to talk only about their perceptions of family. We are not sure what perceptions other children have. However, quite often a person's perception of reality carries more weight than reality does.

1. topic Perception of the birth family.

30% of children have no relationships with their birth families. They don't know anything about their parents or other close relatives. They seem to be quite indifferent to the fact of their existence and don't show any wish to restore the relationships.

These children accuse their parents of being irresponsible and wish they could've changed the parents. 60% of children describe their visits to birth families as rare and frustrating.

These children still have siblings at home but they have no close relationships with them, don't know anything about their lives, interests or jobs

The remaining 10% of children don't reveal negative attitude to the birth family. Anyway none of the children in the study estimate birth family as something they are longing for. The main feelings about the birth family are reject, absence of compassion towards the parents and indifference.

Nobody has a wish to go back to his or her birth parents.

2. topic The meaning of a family as various kind of support (3 patterns).

For 80 % of children family means a resource of a stable income. They say that it's important to have a good place to live, nice clothes, some extra money to buy what they want. The range of their material wishes is limited by some pieces of clothes, equipment for some entertaining activity (skateboards, bikes, roller-skates, etc.).

It appears that rather than financial support children need to have emotional contacts within the family. 70% of children say that they wish to have a family around when they have problems at school or with other children. Within this number 20% mention feelings of anxiety and fear. And then the life without close relationships with the family seems unbearable to them and they miss their families most.

20% of children connect their future with being in the family. They believe that without a family support they won't be able to get better education and a better job. Their uncertainty about the future has roots in the absence of the family as a safe base.

3. topic Perception of different forms of care (3 patterns).

All children in the study appreciate their current form of care. They realize that their care institution is the only available place for them so far. The children highly appreciate the adults who take care of them.

Talking about other forms of care 20% of the children (boys) reveal negative feelings to adoption and to foster family. They don't have a very clear picture what it means. For them it's connected with a set of rules they would have to follow, a certain state of obedience, which they reject. They have a fear of being a failure in making contacts within the family.

80% of children (girls) wouldn't mind adoption or placing into a foster family. They are more flexible in accepting rules and regulations. More than that, they are ready to do their best to adjust a new family. They would like to have other children in the family as it helps to make contacts with the parents. Within this number 30% of children mention about adoption by foreigners. They would prefer to be adopted by foreigners rather than to stay in their home country. To explain this they were talking about the situations they witnessed: some of their peers have been returned back to the children's house after leaving some time in a local family. It never happened to the children taken into foreign families.

Perception of their future family and children (3 patterns).

We think it significant to point out the perception of their future family and plans for having own children. 60% of teenagers haven't thought yet about the possibility of having the family of their own.

20% (girls) don't deny the possibility of having a husband and child, but they are not sure if they have enough money to support their child. But they are sure enough that they will never abandon their child, notwithstanding any circumstances.

The remaining 20% (girls) are not planning to have a family, as life is more interesting and easier without any children.

Summary

Our study revealed some contradictions between the needs and expectations of children from state care institutions. On the one hand they need a family as a safe base. They miss emotional support and some kind of intimacy in relationships. On the other hand they don't want to stay with their birth families where they suffer a lot. The majority of children wouldn't mind to be adopted or to be placed into a foster family, but they have no clear picture what it looks like. They also realize that for many of them it won't be achievable. We can say that for some of them family is something they desire for, but many of them don't include family in the list of their priorities. We have generations of children in Russia for whom the idea of family is vague and unclear.

More than that growing up without a family the majority of them don't have plans to have a family of their own, to have own children. Even those who would like to have children feel insecure and unsure of their capability to provide for good care and education of their children.

Can we help to overcome this contradiction? What can we do to help these children to feel safe and useful and appreciated?

Apparently the answers are in the field of the state social policy. As long as the state doesn't pay attention to these children the situation won't be changed.

Obviously there is a need in care institutions in Russia still, but our view is that we need a new model of them, new training programs for family members and for the care institutions staff to empower them to take part in reform of this system.

We would be interested in expanding on this study of children from state-care institutions. We would like to investigate gender aspects of this problem: whether there are any significant differences in boys and girls from the care institution perception of their life situation.