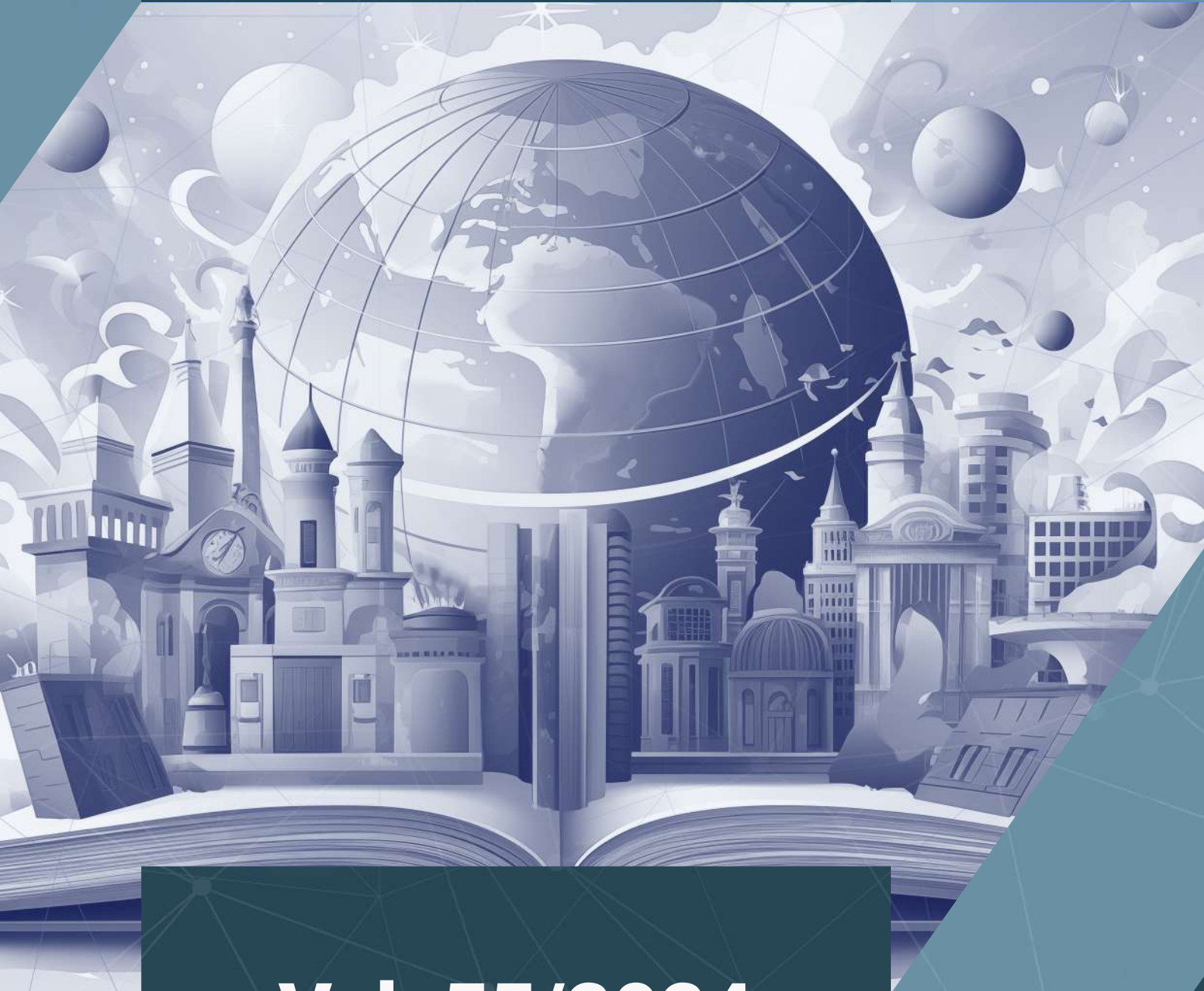




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## **Revealing the Profile of Foster Parents, Biological Parents, Foster Children and the Triadic Relationship amongst them**

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**Abstract.** This research paper explores the foster care framework in Greece, with a particular focus on the triadic relationship among foster carers, biological parents, and foster children. It refers to the current 30 hours compulsory training program of foster parents, emphasizing the necessity of a further specialized comprehensive training, on the ground that well prepared foster carers can better face the complexities of fostering. There is also an imperative need for ongoing support for foster parents, which will be provided in the context of social workers' supervision to meet the behavioral and emotional challenges presented by foster children. The study investigates the potential hindrances faced during the child's placement within the foster home and the vital role social workers play in addressing these difficulties. It delves into the backgrounds of biological parents, foster carers, and foster children, examining the psychological issues and trauma they may confront. The paper highlights the paths of creating an emotional bond, trusting relationships, amongst the child and his/her foster parents and contact issues between foster and biological parents, asserting that these elements are crucial for the child's well-being and his/her integration into the foster family. Moreover, it recognizes the need for policy makers and practitioner's collaboration and interdisciplinary approaches within the foster care system. The study concludes that well-structured support, the empowerment of children through resilience building, and a stable legal framework are foundational to successful application of the institution of fostering. It encourages future research in the form of longitudinal studies, the evaluation of training models, and cross-national comparisons that include Greek foster care organizations to ameliorate the effectiveness of foster care system. The research incorporates theoretical and research studies articles as well as selected books in the field to underline the importance of evidence-based practices in advancing the application of the institution of foster care as well as the experiences of both foster care children, biological and foster parents.

**Keywords.** Foster Carer, Child Fostering, Relationships, Institution, Cognition, Behavioral Profile, Emotional Bond, Foster Children

### **1. Introduction**

Foster care is essential for providing stable and nurturing environments for children who cannot live with their own biological families. Foster carers play a crucial role in this institution, and their experiences, perceptions, and relationships are vital for the well-being and development of the children under their care. Understanding foster carers' views on factors that support or hinder successful fostering is essential for grasping the dynamics of foster care. The

mental health requirements of children in care, the needs of children in foster care, and how foster carers address these needs are crucial. York & Jones (2017) emphasize the significance of attending and addressing the mental health requirements of looked-after children. Contemporary foster care encounters challenges like substantial caseloads, frequent staff turnover or understaffed agencies, and limited data related to the child's and his/her biological family history, which hinder the ability to support and supervise families effectively (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Foster parents who empathize with foster care children's behavior, recognize their trauma and their developmental and emotional age, set boundaries, are emotionally available and make efforts to cover their needs, offer greater placement stability (Konijn et al, 2019).

The relationship between foster and biological families is a critical aspect to consider. Moreover, it is also important to take into account the relationship of grandparents with their grandchildren. The child's functioning, the existing or lack of social support, and daily challenges that affect the stress experienced by the caregiver, offers essential insights into the intricacies of foster care dynamics (Dowdy-Hazlett & Clark, 2024). Understanding these dynamics involves considering the self-care practices of foster carers and the importance of informal support in their role (Gowan et al., 2023; Butler & McGinnis, 2021). The interactions among birth children of foster carers and the bond between foster carers and biological parents are factors that add to the intricate dynamics of foster care. Studying the interactions between birth children, foster carers, and biological parents offers essential insights into the complex dynamics of foster care relationships (Adams et al., 2018; Järvinen & Luckow, 2020).

The challenges that foster carers face in Greece have noticeable differences in comparison to what happens in other European countries and USA. Firstly, although in foreign countries, and especially in Great Britain and USA, is very common the phenomenon of foster placement disruption and the replacement of children in second and third foster families, in Greece rarely the foster parents abandon the foster care children they have taken up. Secondly, abroad as far as the institutions of foster care and adoption are concerned, they consist of two distinct pathways, while in Greece is a common practice the long-term fostering to be evolved in adoption from the same foster care family (Hollett's et al., 2022; Baltiotis & Farmakopoulou, 2023). This concept review paper examines the characteristics of foster carers and the dynamics of their relationships within the fostering institution in Greece, emphasizing the advantages and potential drawbacks of foster care.

## **2. Profile of Participants in the Institution of Foster Care**

### **The Profile and Needs of Biological Parents**

To depict an accurate biological parent's profile and in particular the identification of the reasons that led them to take the decision to place their child in a foster care program- or when their child has been placed into foster care against their will, due to the Children's Prosecutor's Order- is a difficult task. The personality traits of the biological parents and the emotions they experience, is not an easy process, given that every person is unique, just like their emotions, their personal experiences and the circumstances they experience. However, from a literature review, some common characteristics of biological parents can be extracted (Farmakopoulou, 2012; 2022).

The reasons that lead biological parents to give or be forced to give - temporarily or permanently - the care of their minor child to a third person- they are primarily social and economic. Regarding the social reasons, these are, first and foremost, social stereotypes and prejudices, which persist to this day, despite the general progress made by society. Thus, for

example, there have been several cases of teenage girls or young women, who have not received the necessary support and protection from their own families and/or have been abandoned by their families and have not received any support from the child's biological father, being forced to give their child up for fostering or adoption in order to ensure that he or she will have a better standard of living. Still, in previous decades, when people attached great importance to the opinion of third parties, there were many cases where single young mothers gave birth 'secretly' and then immediately gave up the infant to another childless family, by agreement, in order to avoid social outcry. It is encouraging that, over the years, these incidents have almost disappeared, as in today's Greek society there are several single mothers by choice, where the existence of single-parent families is now socially accepted. On the other hand, as far as the economic reasons are considered, both in the past and in modern times, there have been several examples of parents who are unable to meet even their own living needs, let alone the needs of a minor child. This is most often the case in single-parent families, where the child is cared for entirely by one parent who lives below the poverty line, and in nuclear families, where either one or both parents are unemployed. In these cases, they choose to entrust the custody of their minor child to a third party or to ask for the child to be placed in an institution, declaring to the Public Prosecutor for Minors that they are not able to ensure a good standard of living for the child (Farmakopoulou, 2012; Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

In addition to the social and economic reasons mentioned above, biological parents may lose parental custody, following a public prosecutor's order. More specifically, in cases where the social services find poor parental care, i.e. abuse by either or both parents, inability to protect the child, as well as unorthodox administration of the child's property and representation, then the child is removed from his/her biological family and temporarily placed in an institution until he/she is placed in a foster family and maybe later on in adoption by the same or different family (Kounougeri-Manoledaki, 2021).

In addition, biological parents whose infant has been diagnosed early with some form of disability or disorder and they themselves decide to abandon it in the Maternity Hospital or later on in the Children's Hospital, which results in them losing the right to exercise parental custody from the outset and the infant is initially placed in a Child Protection Framework and then in a foster care family (Bruskou, 2021). It has also been observed that biological parents who use drugs sometimes have temporarily or even non-existent custody for their infant children, with the result that they are deprived of parental care or custody by the public prosecution authorities by court order. In this case, the social services, in accordance with the legislation in force, take appropriate measures to ensure the best interests of the minor and his or her immediate rehabilitation in a foster family (Leloux-Ompeer et al, 2016).

The biological parents' history of trauma can significantly influence their parenting behaviors and their children's well-being. Studies indicate that parents who have undergone trauma may view their parenting as inadequate and be overly self-critical, which could result in difficulties in offering sufficient support and care for their children (Kara & Stuart, 2021). Parental trauma can impact children's adjustment and well-being directly and indirectly, demonstrating the intergenerational effects of trauma and adversity through parenting (Koutsopoulou et al., 2024; Jensen et al., 2020). These results highlight the significance of acknowledging and dealing with parental trauma within child development and family dynamics to enhance positive results for both parents and children. Parental trauma can affect how parents raise their children, the bond they form with them, and the general atmosphere at home, which can affect the mental health and actions of the children (Gkintoni et al., 2021a). Research indicates that increased exposure to violence and symptoms of trauma in parents are

linked to reduced parenting competence, which can worsen the difficulties experienced by children in these environments (Brown et al., 2018). Comprehending the intricate relationship between parental trauma, parenting behaviors, and child outcomes is essential for creating successful interventions and support systems that cater to the requirements of parents and children in families impacted by trauma. Addressing parental trauma can promote resilience, secure attachment, and positive family relationships, leading to healthier outcomes for children and families (Gkintoni et al., 2023a).

Finally, concerning the characteristics of biological parents, although it is not possible to identify them precisely, it is interesting to note the findings of some relevant studies, which point out that they are usually people who are vulnerable and weak, come from low intellectual, social, educational and economic level, do not apply precautionary and protective measures and finally have difficulty managing their relationship with their partner, which ultimately negatively affects the infant (Farmakopoulou, 2012).

### **The Profile and Needs of Foster Parents**

Trying to describe the profile of non-kinship foster parents, they are primarily people who embody the values of selfless giving and solidarity, and who also have positive feelings for children (Canali et al, 2016). The above depiction is inferred from their desire to take care and custody of a minor child with whom they do not have any kind of biological relationship, ensuring good living conditions by providing security and love for as long as he/she remains with them. Beyond this, in many cases as far as Greece is concerned the foster parents are people who, for some reason, have not been able to have a biological child despite their desire to do so, prompting them to apply for long-term foster care of a child with the potential prospect to adopt him/her in a couple of years (Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

However, Cherry & Orme (2019) in their extensive review of the existing literature revealed that there is heterogeneity among foster parents and described two subgroups called the 'vital few' and the 'useful many'. The first subgroup focuses on the small proportion of foster parents who provide the largest percentage of care to a small number of foster children, while the second subgroup refers to foster parents who provide an insufficient number of services but make up a greater proportion of foster parents. For example, the vital few usually maintain reciprocal loving relationships with foster children, take them to all therapies needed and rarely give up fostering of a demanding foster child, while the other group seldom establish and maintain long-term trusting relationships with foster children and don't cover all the needs of the foster care children. In addition, a profile analysis study conducted by Dowdy-Hazlett & Clark (2024), which collected data from 362 foster parents, indicated three profiles for foster parents, representing three sub-populations of foster parents, subsequently named 'Resourceful, Strained and Disadvantaged Foster Parents'.

The profile 1 was 36% of the sample was named 'Resourceful Foster Parents' because although the foster parents didn't feel that the preservice training was useful, they had the lowest symptoms of burnout and parenting stress. Profile 2, represented 44% of the sample, was named 'Strained Foster Parents' because they felt that preservice training was in some extent useful and had moderate stress levels. Whereas profile 3, represented 20% of the sample, was named 'Disadvantaged Foster Parents' due to the fact that although they felt that the preservice training was useful their parenting stress had the highest scores related to parenting stress. The above-mentioned analysis shows that there is a larger sub-group of foster parents that are facing greater difficulties with stressors related to foster parenting and they probably have moderate levels of coping and support. 'Resourceful foster parents' seem to be able to handle parenting stress and

STS and stated higher levels of systemic satisfaction than the other two subgroups. 'Disadvantaged foster parents' claimed that they didn't receive appropriate systemic support, leaving them with a feeling that their parenting duty demands outweigh the help and resources they get and this makes them feel burnout and neglected (West et al, 2020).

It should also be noted that, according to the current legislation, prospective foster parents must meet certain criteria, mainly concerning their mental, physical and intellectual health, their financial and marital status, as well as their biological characteristics. In particular, they must be within the age limits laid down by law and have an age difference from the minor they are going to care for. It is also compulsory to provide documents certifying the good mental, physical and psychological health of both the prospective foster parents and their cohabitants. Furthermore, they must not have been convicted or be facing charges for offences involving loss of parental authority, such as, for example, child abuse and neglect (Farmakopoulou, 2022). Finally, they must provide the required documents certifying their ability to meet the financial needs and medical care of a minor (Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018).

Foster parents often are not satisfied of the existing training program, and they appeal for comprehensive ongoing support at the psychological and social level and greater access to resources to alleviate their parenting stress and difficulties that face in fostering (Cooley et al, 2019; Leathers et al, 2019). Foster parents with low levels of support received have been found to have higher symptoms of secondary traumatic stress (Whitt-Woosley et al, 2020). In addition, 15% of foster parents meet criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Therefore, foster parents need specialized training that includes developmental skills for coping with trauma, as well as methods for dealing with mental health disorders and managing the behavior of challenging children in their care (Kaasboll, 2019).

This support should be examined from an *Ecological Systems Theory* viewpoint, where foster parents' microsystem consists of their nuclear and extended family as well as from external supports like neighbors, friends, and all participant agencies (Barnett, et al, 2018; Delinger & Dorius, 2018). Foster carers microsystems also include the existed child protection agencies, wherein they rely on the provision of positive support and relationship with their assigned social worker. but they often feel abandoned of their non-responsiveness due to their huge caseload, since there is severe understaffing of social workers in Greece. In addition, foster carers are frustrated by the financial assistance provided to them, as they feel that it is not sufficient to meet the multiple needs of foster children such as children's psychotherapy, occupational and speech therapy, and their own needs for parental counselling, and thus, they have to spend a large amount of their own salary for this purpose (Baltsiotis & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

### **The Profile and Needs of Foster Care Children**

Several studies have been carried out, mainly in the foreign-language literature, on the profile, and particularly the specific characteristics of foster children, with the results of these studies being mostly discouraging (Leloux-Opmeer, et al, 2016). More specifically, it should be noted that, in the majority of cases, these children have been traumatized due to their previous residence in an inappropriate abusive and or neglected environment from which it was deemed necessary to remove them. Many children have experienced domestic violence and conflictual divorce, and/or parental substance abuse (alcohol and/or drugs), and sometimes parental incarceration (Baltsiotis & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

Furthermore, the psychological burden on these children is caused by factors such as the lack of love, support, and care from the two persons important to them, their father and mother, as well as by their separation from them, which in most cases is distressing for them. Greek children placed in foster care have previously been placed for a long time (at least a couple of years) at a Children's home, which may also have negatively affected their psychological state (Abatzoglou, 2021).

Moreover, it should not be overlooked that the foster care children in many cases have usually lived for a prolonged period in conditions of abuse, neglect, and poverty (their biological families mainly come from low social-economic status), up to their removal from the biological family. Painful experiences associated with physical, emotional, verbal and/or sexual abusive behaviors, and the trauma of being removed from their biological parents affect children's developmental and mental health and thus they represent a vulnerable population at risk. The majority of foster care children, if not all, have experienced feelings of fear for the unknown, loss, sadness, stress and anxiety. If these negative, difficult emotions aren't addressed and treated promptly and efficiently through a multi-disciplinary team consisted of child psychiatrists, psychologists and mainly case management social workers, there is great risk for foster care children to present organic problems, such as abnormal physical and mental development, as well as the onset of a multitude of health problems, both physical and psychosomatic (Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2023; Leloux-Opmeer, et al, 2016). The foster care children are also in danger of having a mental disorder, especially depression and/or PTSD (Farmakopoulou, 2022; 2012).

Directly intertwined with psychological problems are also the behavioral and emotional problems that foster carers usually face. According to studies implemented in other countries, in the majority of cases these children manifest aggressive behavior or enacting defiant disorder, which is mainly due to environmental factors, such as the psychological burden and its causes, mentioned above (Dubois- Comtois et al, 2015). Relatedly, foster minors are likely to experience emotional problems, such as, for example, emotional instability, and they usually find it difficult to express their feelings to the persons in their care and supervision, mainly because they are possessed by the fear of rejection and abandonment (Craven & Lee, 2006). The foster care children often have poor school performance due to frequent moves from their biological families to the children's home and then to the foster care family which means omission of school days while their transition from one school environment to another resulting at facing constant school challenges.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for systemic foster care orientation. Foster care children should be educating about what foster care means and especially about the reasons for being sent to a foster family and the benefits they get from this placement. The systemic orientation that includes children's counselling, will offer them a chance to have an answer to a number of questions that may have, acknowledge their traumatic experiences and create an opportunity for child protection system to affirm the importance and value of children (Kaasboll, 2019).

It is also of paramount importance social workers to inform prospective foster parents about the individual child's characteristics such as his/her special qualities. Moreover, is very useful to give a thorough description to the foster parents about the child's likes and dislikes, activities, interests, and their educational progress. The social worker should also make every effort to highlight child's strengths and provide foster parents with a detailed medical and developmental record. Lastly, the foster parents have every right to be aware of the family

history of the biological parents and their social-cultural and ethnic characteristics of foster care child they take up (Leloux-Ompeer, 2016).

### 3. **Preparation of Foster Parents and Fostered Children**

With the best interests of the minor at its core, the competent bodies supervising foster care have established a comprehensive procedure to ensure that both parties - the foster parents and the minor - are properly prepared for the period they are expected to live together. Regarding the preparation of foster parents, the first and most important stage to be followed is their training and education. Regardless of whether they have biological children, the adults attend a 30-hour training program, which enables them to develop their knowledge of issues relating to the institution of fostering and the daily life of the minor. Indicative issues addressed in the training program include the needs and development of minors depending on their age, the problems that may arise during the minor's stay in the foster family and the way in which these problems can be solved (Farmakopoulou, 2020).

It is worth noting that after the completion of each thematic unit there are comprehension and consolidation activities, which helps the prospective foster parents to assimilate the new knowledge and later to become effective in the task they will undertake, that of caring for a minor. Once the proposal to link the minor with the prospective foster family is made, the two parties meet, which initially takes place in the children's center where the minor is temporarily accommodated. This is because it is in this place that the minor feels safe and can therefore express his or her thoughts and feelings more easily. During these meetings, the adults and the minor could interact with each other, to understand each other's characteristics and habits, and to gradually foster a relationship between them (Anynet.gr, 2022).

Furthermore, it is important to explain that, during the first meetings between the minor and the prospective foster parents, a person who is known to the minor and inspires trust is always present. This person is usually a social worker, who is familiar with child developmental psychology and has a thorough background in the minor in question. Through careful observation and recording of the behavior and reactions of both parties, the social worker can come to conclusions about whether taking on temporary care is in the best interests of the minor and whether the prospective foster parents can effectively fulfil their role. Finally, once the period of acquaintance and adaptation to the structure is completed and the Inter-disciplinary team decides that the placement of the minor in the specific family is feasible, the foster parents continue to receive the help and support of the social worker and the body supervising the foster care, for any problems that will arise during the period of the minor's stay in the family (Anynet.gr, 2022; Betsy & Konida, 2020).

Although the above process is considered sufficient to ensure rapid adaptation and thus smooth coexistence of the minor with the foster family, it is worth noting the opinion of Mallouchou et al. (2022), who stressed that the preparation of the adolescent minor is not sufficient and effective, since a preparatory process is not followed, during which he or she would have the opportunity to be informed about the foster care status, his or her rights and the maintenance of contact with his or her biological family, as well as to participate in decision-making on issues of concern to him or her. According to the researchers, the omission of the above procedure may even result in the minor having difficulty in adapting to his or her new environment.

Thorough training of foster parents is essential for adequately caring for abused and neglected children in foster care. Training programs like the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting Group Preparation and Selection of Foster and/or Adoptive Families and Foster

Parent Resources for Information, Development, and Education are frequently utilized to provide foster parents with essential skills (Helton et al., 2017; Linares et al., 2006; Solomon et al., 2016). The programs concentrate on choosing appropriate families for foster parenting and assessing their capabilities (Solomon et al., 2016). Foster parents frequently encounter difficulties with children's behavioral issues, underscoring the necessity for enhanced training, readiness, and assistance for foster parents. Research highlights that foster parents are more inclined to continue fostering when they feel well-prepared, valued, and respected by agencies (Leathers et al., 2021).

Additionally, moving children in and out of foster care must be carefully planned and prepared to guarantee success (Newquist et al., 2020). Foster parents are crucial in assisting children during transitions, and their training and support significantly affect the results. Foster parents should participate in training programs focused on caring for children, particularly adolescents, in foster care to help them transition successfully into adulthood (Antle et al., 2009). To improve outcomes, foster parents must be actively involved in decision-making processes concerning services and support for the children under their care (Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2021).

Studies show that parental educational expectations substantially impact children's cognitive development and academic success (Halkiopoulou et al., 2021b; Liu et al., 2022). Children's cognitive skills are crucial for their holistic growth. Early evaluation and intervention in domains like language proficiency are crucial for promptly recognizing and dealing with possible problems (Gkintoni & Dimakos, 2022; Gkintoni et al., 2023; Hou, 2022; Sortwell et al., 2023). The ongoing debate about the influence of preschool education on children's cognitive skills emphasizes the significance of early educational interventions (Halkiopoulou et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2021). Ultimately, it is crucial to adequately train foster parents, provide support systems, and engage them in decision-making processes to guarantee the well-being and success of children in foster care. It is essential to enhance children's cognitive development by involving parents and implementing early educational interventions to support their overall growth and academic achievement (Gkintoni et al., 2023a; Gkintoni et al., 2023c; Gkintoni et al., 2023d; Tzachrista et al., 2023; Riebschleger, J., Day, A., & Damashek, A., 2015; Adkins, 2021).

#### **4. Ways of Integrating the Child into the Foster Family**

The ways of integration of the minor into the foster family are directly related to the *type of foster care* decided by the public prosecutor or the responsible organization. The importance of the type of *relief foster care* is well recognized, where essentially the minor visits the foster family either during the weekend or for a period of one week. These are cases of minors who have serious health problems and require systematic and increased care. The placement is therefore temporary, serves specific purposes and requires cooperation between the biological and foster families. On the other hand, the type of *emergency foster care*, where the minor must be removed immediately from his/her biological family and therefore the procedures for placing him/her in a foster family are accelerated, since nothing more permanent has been secured. In such cases, *kinship fostering* is usually preferred, which is in the minor's best interests, given that he or she already knows and has developed links with the family to which he or she is to be placed. *Short, medium, and long-term fostering*, which lasts from two months to more than two years, are also recognized. All these three cases serve a different purpose, i.e. the minor is linked to a family which is listed not only in the Special but also in

the National Register, provided that he/she has first and foremost been acquainted and adapted to it (Koufonikolakou, 2021).

At this point it is crucial to mention that integrating a child into a foster family can be a complex process, particularly when considering the potential impact of trauma on both the child and the biological parents. Experiencing trauma can impact how parents behave and the general atmosphere within the family, which can affect a child's adaptation and welfare (Gkintoni et al., 2024a). It is essential to comprehend how trauma is passed down through generations and how it impacts parenting satisfaction and children's coping strategies in order to create a supportive and nurturing environment for children in foster care (Lang & Gartstein, 2017; Cross et al., 2018). Foster families can address challenges arising from parental trauma by implementing strategies to support the child and biological parents in their healing process, fostering resilience and positive outcomes for everyone. Using gamification can help integrate a child into a foster family by providing interactive experiences that encourage bonding and communication, as suggested by Antonopoulou et al. (2021), Georganou et al. (2022). Foster families can improve the child's sense of belonging and connection by integrating gamification elements like reward systems for positive behaviors, collaborative games promoting teamwork, and storytelling activities for emotional expression. Gamification can offer a platform for children to establish trust, enhance social skills, and express themselves in a secure and encouraging environment, promoting a feeling of security and stability within the foster family structure. By integrating gamification strategies, foster families can establish a supportive and inclusive environment that helps children feel valued, understood, and supported as they transition from their past experiences to their new family setting (Gkintoni et al. (2021a).

## **5. Foster Care and Bonding**

The primary objective of the staff and organizations supervising foster care is to safeguard the best interests of the minor and to place him/her in a healthy environment in which he/she can develop physically, spiritually, socially, morally and psycho-emotionally. In order to make this possible, it is necessary, among other things, to create an emotional bond between the minor and the other members of the foster family in which he or she has been or is to be placed (Vecchiato et al, 2016).

When the traumatic previous experiences of minors are taken into account -therefore the fact that are separated from their biological family and placed in a foster home- is understandable why is difficult to ensure an emotional bonding between foster carers and children. In particular, the majority of these cases are children who have not established secure attachments with members of their biological family, as they have not experienced the protection, affection, security and love they needed to have a normal psycho-emotional development. This, in fact, tends to negatively affect other areas, such as, for example, the formation of social and friendship relationships, and has a negative impact on their psychology and behavior (Craven & Lee, 2006; Gkintoni, 2023; Gkintoni & Ortiz, 2023).

Therefore, the primary concern of foster parents should be to create the necessary conditions and prerequisites for the minor to develop an emotional bond with them. A decisive factor in this direction is the manifestation of positive emotions, such as care, trust, tenderness, and love, which the minor needs to experience to gradually develop an emotional bond. In addition, it is important for foster parents to spend quality time with the minor, implementing enjoyable playful activities with him/her. In this way, they will also be able to "bond" emotionally with the minor, which will help them to coexist smoothly and to deal with any problems that may arise during this period (Baltsiotis & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

Finally, for the development of the emotional bond between the minor and the foster family, the cooperation, and the existence of relations between the two families, biological and foster, is essential. This is understandable since the juvenile continues to have feelings for his biological parents, to whom he may return in the future, and therefore feels secure if the adults who have temporarily taken custody of him do not attempt to cut him off from those he feels as his family (Dowdy-Hazlett & Clark, 2024).

#### **6. Communication between Foster and Biological Parents**

As mentioned above, the development of the emotional bond between the minor and the foster family requires, among other things, the maintenance of communication and the establishment of relationships between the foster and biological parents (Ponciano, 2010). In addition, this communication becomes imperative, as under the current law, foster parents only take care of the minor for a certain period of time, without this meaning that the biological parents do not retain their rights towards the minor (Koufonikolakou, 2021).

Therefore, it is necessary for adults to have at least a basic communication with each other to jointly settle issues concerning the upbringing of the minor, always keeping in mind the normal development of the minor (Kounougeri-Manoledaki, 2021). Finally, it should be recalled that, as defined by the current law, as well as by Article 1656 of the Civil Code, facilitating the communication of the minor with his/her biological family constitutes one of the main obligations of the foster parent. Consequently, it is necessary for foster and biological parents to communicate with each other in order to facilitate in this way the minor's contact with his/her parents (Abatzoglou, 2021).

#### **Reasons for Separation of the Child from his/her Biological Family**

Separation from the biological family is carried out by order of the public prosecutor, if a social investigation has been conducted by social workers and it has been certified that the parents and/or the environment in which the minor resides are not suitable to ensure his/her normal physical, mental and psychosocial development. Also, in some cases, separation from the biological family is at the urging of the parents themselves, or one of them, when the existing conditions do not allow them to exercise their parental duties in the right way and they wish to ensure better living conditions for their child (Kounougeri-Manoledaki et al., 2021).

It is therefore clear that separation from the biological family is always done with the best interests and health of the minor in mind. However, this process is painful for him or her and should be carried out carefully so as not to traumatize him or her psychologically. In particular, both during the separation process and during the first period after it is completed, it is important that the minor receives help and support from a multidisciplinary team consisting of a child psychiatrist, a psychologist and a social worker, who will help him to manage his emotions, understand the reasons why it was deemed necessary to remove him from his family environment, to adapt easily to his new daily life and to realize that he can, if he wishes, maintain contact with his biological family (Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

It is important that the biological parents of the minor receive the necessary help and support, so that they will be able to resume the actual care and custody of the minor in the future. This assistance shall be proportionate to the needs of the family and the reasons for the temporary removal of the minor's custody. Thus, it can be, for example, financial or psychological (Anynet.gr, 2023).

### **Maintaining Contact between the Minor and his/her Biological Family**

As mentioned above, both the provisions of the Civil Code and the legislation on the institution of fostering provide for the maintenance of communication between the minor and his/her biological family, setting as a sole condition that the minor's interests should not be affected by this contact. More specifically, according to developmental psychologists, biological parents are the reference point and at the same time the most important persons in a child's life, from the moment of birth. Besides, parents (or one parent in the case of a single-parent family) are the first person(s) with whom the child will establish an emotional bond. Social scientists have repeatedly stressed the critical importance of maintaining the foster child's relationship with his/her biological parents, given that it contributes to the smooth adaptation to the new environment and the smooth return to the family context, while it is also considered a crucial factor for the smooth psycho-emotional development of the child, although they have found that in practice this is often not the case. As regards the factors that favor the maintenance of this relationship, according to the findings of the literature, the positive attitude of both parties, i.e. the biological and foster parents, plays a primary role, but the attitude of the minor placed in foster care plays a secondary role (Mancinelli et al, 2021). At this point, it is important to note that the above seems to apply to some extent even in cases where the relationship between the two parties is not the expected one, i.e. when there are incidents of neglect, violence, or general miscarriage of parental care. The legislative establishment of the right of a minor placed in foster care to maintain contact with his/her biological parents is based on the aforementioned view of psychologists (Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that there are also cases of parents who abuse their children - physically, psychologically, even sexually - an act that is punishable by law and leads to the removal of parental responsibility. In this case, contact between the minor and his or her biological family is limited and conditional, always in the presence of a third person, to ensure that the minor's mental and physical health is not endangered. It should be explained that in any case, foster parents are responsible for maintaining contact between the minor and his/her biological family and for this reason they too maintain a relationship with the parents of the child they have fostered, to facilitate this contact (Abatzoglou, 2021).

In particular, their relationship should in principle be based on trust, i.e. both parties should be convinced that all actions they take are for the benefit of the minor and not for their own interests. It should be noted at this point that this is not a given, as it has been noted that there tends to be a climate of mistrust between biological and foster parents. In addition, there should be honesty and understanding between adults as to the reasons and motives for separation and fostering respectively. On the other hand, foster parents should not be critical and scornful of the biological parents of the minor they have taken over, i.e. they should not criticize them for having lost custody of the minor.

More specifically, regarding biological parents, they should seek in every way to approach their child, to show interest in his/her daily life and during contacts with him/her, whether by telephone or in person, to make their positive feelings for him/her evident. In this way, the minor will understand that his parents love him and that they wish to resume custody and effective care of him when circumstances allow. Turning, on the other hand, to the foster parents, it is important that they promote the maintenance of the relationship of the minor they have taken over with his biological family. This can be done if they encourage the child to contact or meet his or her parents, if they too maintain contact with them, and if they speak positively to the minor about his or her biological parents. A particularly important factor in maintaining the relationship between the juvenile and the biological family is played by the

juvenile himself, in particular the feelings he has for his parents, the relationship he had already developed with them, as well as his previous experiences as they had been formed for the years, they had been exercising custody and actual care (Chateauneuf et al, 2017).

The willingness to cooperate, which should exist on both sides, is fundamental. Adults should seek to discuss with each other the issues that concern the minor and cooperate to jointly seek solutions to any problems that the minor is facing (Georgarou, 2016). Concluding, it is important for both parties to be governed by positive emotions, such as empathy, understanding, acceptance and trust, on the one hand, and to recognize that building relationships with each other is an important prerequisite for the child's smooth adaptation to the new environment and for his or her all-round development, on the other.

### **Need for Collaborative Relationships between Biological and Foster Parents**

As explained in the previous section, it is important that the two families -foster and biological- have collaborative relationships, always with the best interests of the minor and his or her normal psychosocial development at the center.

In particular, their relationship should in principle be based on trust, i.e. both parties should be convinced that all actions they take are for the benefit of the minor and not for their own interests. It should be stated at this point that this is not a given, as it has been explained that there tends to be a climate of mistrust between biological and foster parents. In addition, there should be honesty and understanding between adults as to the reasons and motives for separation and fostering respectively. On the other hand, foster parents should not be critical and scornful of the biological parents of the minor they have taken over, i.e. they should not criticize them for having lost custody of the minor.

Therefore, the willingness to cooperate, which should be present on both sides, is fundamental. Adults should seek to discuss with each other the issues that concern the minor and cooperate in order to jointly seek solutions to any problems that the minor is facing (Georgarou, 2016; Chateauneuf et al., 2017). To summarize the above, it is important for both parties to be governed by positive emotions, such as empathy, understanding, acceptance and trust, on the one hand, and to recognize that building relationships between them is an important prerequisite for the child's smooth adaptation to the new environment and for his or her all-round development, on the other (Oikonomou et al., 2024).

### **Return of the Child to his/her Biological Family**

As in the case of removal, the return of the child to his/her biological family should first of all be based on a social survey which is conducted by a social worker, which will provide information on the suitability of both the parents and the surrounding environment in which the minor will return. Essentially, through the social survey it will be determined whether and to what extent all the conditions are met for the child to be safe and develop smoothly on a physical, psychosocial, moral and emotional level (Carlson et al., 2019).

Furthermore, before a decision is taken on the return of the child/children to the biological family, it is important that the social worker and the psychologist discuss with the minor (or minors in the case of siblings placed in the same foster family) to be able to draw conclusions on whether he/she wishes to return to the biological family. If the child prefers to remain with the foster family, either because he or she has developed emotional ties with the foster family or because he or she considers the environment more suitable for him or her, this should be taken seriously by mental health professionals. Finally, it is important that the minor's biological parents also receive the necessary support before the minor returns to them. In

particular, sessions with a child psychologist and a social worker should take place, who will give them the appropriate guidance to help their child to readjust to the family environment, improve relations with them and feel safe (Niederleetal, n.d.).

## **7. Communication between Foster Parents and Children**

Apart from the importance of communication and maintaining contact between the minor and his/her biological family, as discussed in the previous section, the communication between the foster parents and the minor they have taken over is also crucial, since only in this way can the development of an emotional bond between them be achieved, the resolution of any problems that may arise during the coexistence, as well as the smooth psycho-emotional development of the minor (Baltsiotis & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

### **Support and Empowerment of the Child by the Foster Parents and Problems they Confront**

One of the main objectives of the institution of fostering is to place the minor in a family environment that will be able to offer him/her the appropriate support to develop smoothly, as well as to strengthen him/her, mainly on an emotional and psychological level. The above, likewise, is a predominant concern of foster parents. In order to be able to support the minor in all aspects and to empower him/her emotionally and psychologically, foster parents should first of all have received the required training, which is also considered a prerequisite for registration in the National and Special Register of Prospective Foster Parents. As part of the training program, the adults receive all the necessary guidance to enable them to fulfil their role effectively (Georgarou, 2016).

In addition, it is important that throughout the minor's stay in the foster family and before his/her placement, both parties are monitored by a social worker and a psychologist, who will discern the minor's needs and advise the foster parents on how to approach him/her effectively in order to support and empower him/her. Finally, although in many cases it is taken for granted, the adults themselves should be aware of the criticality of the role they have taken on and, by extension, want to support the child in a holistic way (Anynet.gr, 2023).

Despite the will and the desire for a smooth coexistence of the minor with the foster family, however, it is extremely likely that problems will arise during the period of cohabitation. These problems may relate to the minor's behavior, the settlement of his or her daily life issues, and his or her relationship with other members of the foster family, such as the biological children of the foster family. Most problems can be resolved after a frank discussion, if there is of course a positive intention to resolve them on both sides (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004).

To solve these problems, the social worker plays a particularly important role in the first instance, as he or she is obliged to maintain contact with the family throughout the period the minor is accommodated there. In particular, the social worker must discuss with both the minor and the foster parents, understand the nature and causes of the problems and try to reconcile the situations, giving appropriate advice to both parties. Finally, it is worth saying that foster parents are already trained in how to effectively approach the minor and, by extension, how to manage any problems that may arise during the cohabitation (Anynet.gr, 2023).

## **8. Discussion and Conclusion**

In conclusion, this comprehensive research paper underscores the myriad facets involved in the Greek foster care system and the importance of fostering positive relationships between foster carers, biological parents, and children for the overall success of foster

placements. Key findings point to the critical need for advanced training and ongoing support for foster parents, which can equip them to address the various psychological, emotional, and developmental needs of children in foster care. Additionally, the maintenance and nurturing of emotional bonds between all parties, alongside consistent communication, and cooperation, are pivotal to the child's well-being and growth. The study emphasizes the significance of a strong legislative foundation that aligns with the fundamental rights of children and supports the complex dynamics of the foster care environment.

Future research is essential to further understand the long-term effects of foster care on children and to evaluate the efficacy of existing training and support models. By drawing insights from an expansive literature review and an array of legal measures, the paper prompts stakeholders, and policymakers to foster legislative advancements, create more resilient support systems, and institute collaborative approaches to enhance the lives of children in foster care. Through continual improvement and a focus on the psycho-emotional aspects of fostering relationships, the welfare and development of children in foster care can be significantly improved, ensuring that their rights are fully realized and supported within the foster care system.

Future work arising from this research paper should concentrate on the development of culturally adaptive training models and the establishment of evidence-based support mechanisms that cater to the diversity of foster care systems across different countries. Additionally, the evaluation of long-term psychological and social outcomes for foster children and their families would be essential to advance knowledge in the field. Research to bridge the gap between policy and practice, thereby ensuring that legislative requirements align with the effective care and well-being of foster children, would also be valuable.

Since this paper focuses on the Greek foster care system solely, where both the institutions of foster care and adoption have significantly been delayed to be implemented - although a great effort has recently been made to ameliorate the application of these child protection frameworks- it can't be claimed that this paper is typical to what exists to other cultural contexts. Therefore, subsequent studies should address this by comparing findings from different countries to provide a more global perspective. Additionally, given the complexity of the foster care experience, interdisciplinary research involving psychology, social work, education and law sciences would be instrumental in providing holistic support to all parties involved in foster care system.

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### **Legislation**

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