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Uninformed, afraid and confused: what children need to know at the beginning of their foster care process.

Child Care in Practice

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Uninformed, afraid and confused: what children need to know at the beginning of their foster care process.

This article focuses on the information that children need to be given when they are moving to a fostering placement. Generally, children are not consulted or informed prior to the foster decisions being made, nor when they arrive at the placement. Therefore, they do not usually know their foster care situation and the changes it implies for their lives. The literature available shows that informing children is the first step in enabling them to participate in their own fostering process. Participation empowers them and endorses successful intervention. In order to understand which information is crucial for children's wellbeing and adaptation to this initial fostering moment, a qualitative research study was carried out. The study was developed in Spain and it used focus groups and interviews as instruments to gather information. The sample was composed of 30 fostered children, 42 parents, and 63 child care professionals. The results show the importance of sharing five essential aspects with children: a) the real reasons for family separation; b) the intervention which took place before removing them from their home; c) their rights as fostered children; d) the characteristics of the foster placement; e) the visitation schedule. It helps children to cope with their new situation by empowering them and making them more adaptive to face all of the changes which are coming. Finally, some good practice tips for professional were also stated in order to improve the information sharing experience.

Keywords: Child Welfare System; foster care; children's voices; child wellbeing; children participation.

Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) gave a huge step forward for the involvement of children in decision making when it established their right to participate in those choices that affect their lives (Alderson, 2000; Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2005; Shier, 2001;).

Specifically with children in foster care, several authors agree on the relevance of guaranteeing their right to be informed and to have their point of view considered in

decisions (Block, Oran, Oran, Baumrind, & Goodman, 2010; Goodyer, 2011; Havlicek, Lin, & Braun, 2016; ;). Informing children is crucial because disinformation or lack of understanding of information hinders their participation in their own fostering process (Bell, 2002; McCarthy, 2016; Pölkki, Vornanen, Pursiainen, & Riikonen, 2012). As Bouma, López, Knorth, and Grietens (2018) explain, informing children adequately is a prerequisite for participation. These authors also point out that hearing and involving children is necessary for meaningful participation.

However, currently this right is not being ensured in practice. As many recent studies show, children manifest their discontent for not being well informed and involved enough in their fostering process (Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, & Pastor, 2017; Mateos, Vaquero, Balsells, & Ponce, 2017; McLeod, 2007; Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010; Montserrat, 2014; Muench, Diaz, & Wright, 2017; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012; Nybell, 2013; Pölkki, Vornanen, Pursiainen, & Riikonen, 2012). Even when children are allowed to take part in conferences, their role is minimal; they are not told about the purpose of the meetings, their opinions have no power to make changes, and most of the children think conferences are a waste of time because they are not told what they need to do for things to change (Muench et al., 2017).

Besides the few opportunities for real participation, several authors state the numerous benefits of involving children in fostering processes. For instance, Barnes (2012), McLeod (2007), Schofield (2005) and Triseliotis, Borland, Hill and Lambert (1995) establish that listening to and informing children not only fulfils their rights but also ensures more positive and effective results in protection plans. In particular, true and complete information is crucial to enable the transparency required for an active role of children in their fostering and reunification process (Del Valle & Fuertes, 2007). Bessell (2011) complete these theories adding that when children are informed and able

to participate, it increases the chance of success in the foster placement and reinforces the supportive relationship with their caseworker. According to this, informing children and giving them an active role has positive effects on child care interventions.

Additionally, the findings in the literature, it also impacts on their own well-being.

As seen, being heard reinforces a child's self-esteem (Schofield, 2005) and having someone who children can share their feelings with empowers them and has an influence on their emotional well-being (Goodyer, 2014; Husby, Slettebø, & Juul, 2018; Martin, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2010; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). In the same respect, giving children the chance to truly communicate with caseworkers aids their emotional welfare and their capacity for resilience (Husby et al., 2018; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012; Ungar, 2013). In contrast, the lack of participation decreases their self-esteem and self-efficacy (Leeson, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2010) and has a negative impact on their sense of dignity and self-worth (Bessell, 2011). According to McCarthy (2016), when children try to participate and know more about certain issues but remain excluded, they express low moods, self-harm and poor regulation of emotions.

Therefore, it is essential that caseworkers make children feel like a key element of the intervention by informing them and taking into account their perspective on decisions. Several authors highlight the relevance of social welfare professionals informing children and making them feel guided and supported (Bravo & Del Valle, 2009; Van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2015) and guaranteeing child participation in the fostering process (Bell, 2002; Husby et al., 2018; McCarthy, 2016; Mcleod, 2007; Pölkki et al., 2012;).

Child participation is a significant challenge for professionals but also for children (Pölkki et al., 2012) who are not even aware that they have the right to be informed and participate in the decisions which affect their lives (McCarthy, 2016).

Family separation and children's informational needs

The Child Welfare System acts when the physical and/or psychological well-being of children are seriously compromised due to a family situation of abuse or neglect. In order to ensure a child's well-being, protection services proceed with family separation.

Family separation impacts on the emotions of the whole family and means the beginning of a long, difficult process for them all. It is especially difficult for children because they are required to leave their homes, change their daily lives (routines, friends, personal spaces...) and start living in a foster placement. As Murphy and Jenkinson (2012) highlight, children miss their parents and siblings and may even miss their pets, toys or leisure activities, so feelings of grief and loss surround them. In the study by Mitchell et al. (2010), the researchers asked children what may have been useful at the time of transition to the foster placement, and three topics were identified: helping children to face their insecurities related to the foster care placement, supporting children to share their emotions, and helping them to cope with stress.

For all of these issues it is helpful to inform children about the foster placement and process but also about the reasons why the family separation is taking place. On one hand, children's knowledge about their new fostering situation and placement decreases feelings of uncertainty and insecurity and makes this process less traumatic (Montserrat, 2014; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012). On the other hand, being aware of the issues which have resulted in family separation helps children to cope with this difficult moment and throughout the reunification process (Balsells et al., 2017; Ellingsen et al., 2011; Schofield, 2005). As seen, a comprehensive understanding of family matters facilitates a positive vision of fostering and increases the commitment and the willingness to achieve reunification, both crucial in child participation (Balsells, Pastor, Mateos, Vaquero, & Urrea, 2015; Lietz & Strength, 2011).

Other studies observed that children's main interests at the beginning of the fostering process are related to knowing more about: a) the family problems and incidents which led to the foster care situation, b) the characteristics of the foster placement, and c) the changes that fostering will mean for their lives (Mateos et al., 2017; Montserrat, 2014; Pölkki et al., 2012).

However, giving information to children is a process which should be carefully thought through. Murphy and Jenkinson (2012) and Pölkki et al. (2012) recommend providing true, clear and complete information to children, but adapting how it is communicated according to their age and their ability to comprehend it. Muench et al. (2017) also recommends explaining the information in a simple and accessible way. With regards to the involvement of children in conferences, Muench et al. (2017) underscores the need to inform and prepare children before meetings. This preparation includes telling children what the objectives and outcomes of conferences are, sharing reports and assessments before the meeting, and being supportive before, during and after meetings.

Nevertheless, children have preferences regarding who they would like to be informed by. As Pölkki et al. (2012) discovered, they wish to receive the information from their biological family or from their caseworkers if they have a good relationship. In this regard, McCarthy (2016) found that children considered their caseworkers more approachable when they show consistency, availability and the ability to have a laugh with them and when they present themselves in an approachable manner. In the same way, Husby et al. (2018) recommends some strategies for caseworkers to get closer to children such as playing and having fun together, showing empathy and respect, being friendly and pleasant, listening carefully to what children have to say, being

understanding and honest, and sharing personal information with children so they can trust them more easily.

Background of the study

The number of child and adolescent in care in Spain is 43,902. Of these, 14,104 children were in residential care and 19,641 with foster families. Family foster care is the most adopted measures by protection services with a clear predominance of the extended family care modality- 65% of foster care- versus 35% in kinship family (Ministry of Health, Studies and Research, 2017).

This predominance of fostering in extended family can be justified by the principles and values of Spanish culture that strongly extols family ties (Del Valle, Bravo, & López, 2009; Del Valle, Canali, Bravo, & Vecchiato, 2013). In addition, the biological family often contemplates the family of others as a rival in the competition for the affection of their sons and daughters, which facilitates the creation of more foster care in extended families and residential centers than in other families.

These cultural values are not exclusively, to Spanish culture, but can also be observed in other southern European countries such as Italy (Del Valle et al., 2013) and Portugal (López, Delgado, Carvalho, & Del Valle, 2014) and in other countries such as Israel (Kosher et al., 2018).

With regard to residential care, the Spanish Child Protection System also shows its particularities. It is observed that the stays in residential centers are usually prolonged, which supposes a challenge to face by the services of protection (Bravo & Del Valle, 2009). López and Del Valle (2015) point out that the profile of the children with the longest stay in residential care is those between 9 and 12 years old and present behavioral and / or emotional difficulties, with biological families that show psychosocial problems. Another challenge of residential care in Spain is the preparation

of those who are welcomed and welcomed in their transition to adult life. As Cuenca, Campos and Goig (2018) notes, a large part of these young people have their biological family as the main reference for asylum once they reach the age of majority, which is negatively valued by professionals who reject their suitability for it.

Regarding child participation, recent research shows how it is a pending subject in the Spanish Protection System. The actual moment of family separation is a trauma for children (Montserrat, 2014) who, in the vast majority of the cases, were not consulted or completely informed before it happens (Balsells et al., 2017; Mateos et al., 2017; Montserrat, 2014). Thus, another important challenge to realize the participation of children in the Child Protection System is to respond to what happens when the child's point of view contradicts the professional opinion about what is their primary interest.

Method

Aims and approach

This research project studies the information that is usually unknown to children when they start a foster care process. The aim of the study is to examine the children's participation at the beginning of their foster care process in Spain to identify the most relevant aspects in its participation.

A qualitative research project was carried out using a multi-informant design that includes the point of view and opinion of fostered children, complementing it with the voices of parents and professionals. The complexity of the object of study justifies the need to collect the voices of all those involved, given that the very nature of participation is the result of interaction between the position of professionals, their families and children and adolescents. Therefore, the research design promotes

children's right to participation and highlights the relevance of knowing what children's have to say about their own fostering experiences.

The design of the investigation is qualitative with descriptive and explanatory purposes. The perspective focused on parents, children and professionals as experts in (Stolz, Brandon, Wallace, & Roberson, 2013) the reunification process and essential to its improvement. This methodological design was deemed necessary to deepen and better understand the role of social support in the processes of families in the child protection system (Lin, 2014).

The analysis aimed to make valid and well-founded inferences (Gibbs 2012).

Participants

The study involved a total of 135 people. Participants included 30 fostered children in kinship and residential care, 42 biological parents of those children, and 63 child welfare professionals.

The 30 children had spent at least one year in foster care. Of them, 21 had being reunified with their biological parents and 9 had a plan to return home in two or less months. They were aged between 6-12 years old, and 53% were boys and 47% were girls. Most of them were fostered in residential care (17 children), others were cared for by relatives (8 children) and some of them had been in both types of placements (4 children). It is relevant to highlight that only one child lived with a non-relative foster family, combined with a period of time living in residential care.

In the case of the 42 biological parents, 37 were reunified and 5 were involved in plans for reunification. Of them, 76% were women and 24% were men. They were all cooperating with caseworkers and showed a positive attitude of collaboration with social services.

Of the 63 childcare professional, 75% were women and 25% men, all more than 25 years old (26% aged between 25-35; 45% between 36-45; and 29% over 46 years old). Of them, 20 were social educators, 20 psychologists, 13 social workers and 10 pedagogues. With regards to their tasks, 33 were working with the biological parents, 16 were working in residential care and 5 were carrying out interventions with foster families.

Procedure of sample and data analysis

The researchers of the study contacted child welfare professionals from four Spanish regions (Catalonia, Balearics Islands, Cantabria and Galicia) to be able to gain access to the participants.

The selection criteria were as follows. The children had to (1) be between 12 and 20 years old and be related to the selected biological families, (2) have spent at least one year in foster care, and (3) have no physical, mental, or sensory incapacity. The parents had to (1) be families who were relatives of the children and adolescents who are described above, (2) be families who were already reunified or were waiting to be reunified in the next one or two months, (3) be families who had undergone or were undergoing a reunification plan, (4) be families with a positive attitude and predisposition toward collaboration with professionals, and (5) be heterogeneous families (i.e., different ages of the parents and children/adolescents, diverse types of family structures, etc.). Finally, the professionals had to (1) work in the children's protection system, (2) have experience in residential or family care, and (3) be representative of the multi-disciplinary nature of professionals, that is, they must come from various areas of training, including social educators, pedagogues, psychologists, and social workers. Using these criteria, a convenience sample (non-probabilistic sample) of mothers, fathers and children were selected depending on how feasible it

was for them to take part in the investigation. The sampling did not seek fathers, mothers and children who were related, as the family variable was not selected.

Data collection strategies were in the form of focus groups and semi-structured interviews, both techniques made it possible to acquire a deep understanding of participants' points of view and experiences. The data from the interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed.

The analysis of information was based on an analysis of content. The coding process used a bottom-up strategy, which means an inductive strategy where categories emerge both from the researchers' analysis and analysis of the literature. For qualitative data processing the software Atlas.ti 6.1 was used. Finally, all of the analysis codes were evaluated and verified by seven experts on the topic.

Instruments and measuring tools

A total of 18 semi-structured interviews and 22 focus groups (9 focus groups with professionals and 13 focus groups with biological parents) were carried out. All of them used the following three instruments to gather information: a) a register form to fill in with the participants' socio-demographic data (name, age, family structure, residence) and information about the fostering process (type of foster placement, time children were living in foster care, whether reunification had being achieved or not) ; b) a key main list of questions to guide the focus groups or semi-structured interviews (Table 1); c) a notebook to note down factors related to the development of the focus group or interview (date, timing, place, people motivation, cohesion of the group and other observations).

[Insert Table 1]

Reliability of the data and ethical considerations

This study was approved by the ethical committee the Institute for Research in Biomedicine and adheres to ethical principles consisting of four pillars, which were beneficence, autonomy, justice, and do no harm.

According to this principles, the language of the questions was adapted to the context and participants in the interviews and focus groups in order to help participants feel more comfortable and deal better with their own emotions. The transcriptions were peer reviewed to maintain the reliability and credibility of the data. The process of extracting codes and categories was evaluated by various judges. In consequence, similar to the content analysis, this process was subjected to peer review to achieve the maximum reliability and credibility of the extracted data.

Also, ethical considerations were accounted for in this study by using an informed consent form signed by the participants. This document was prepared for the participants, explaining the purpose of the research, the scientific purpose, their rights as participants and the confidential treatment of the data collected. Before doing the interviews and discussion groups, the participants were encouraged to ask any questions to corroborate their understanding and willingness to participate. They voluntarily agreed to be part of the study after having its objective explained to them. In the case of children and adolescents, authorization and consent was requested from the parents or the public administration that had legal guardianship at that time.

Results

As highlighted previously, to involve children in their foster care process and promote their wellbeing at the beginning of this process it is crucial to inform them about certain key factors related to their situation.

The content analysis of fostered children, parents and child welfare professionals shows five key aspects related to relevant information for children. These five aspects are commonly not shared (or appropriately shared) with children when they start a fostering process: a) Information about the reasons for family separation; b) Information about the process prior to the foster care decision; c) Information about their rights as fostered children; d) Information about the characteristics of the foster placement where they are going to live; e) Information about the visitation schedule with their biological family. Moreover, participants suggested ideas of good practice strategies for professionals to consider when giving all this information. All of these aspects are highlighted in the following sections by some quotes obtained from the participants' voices transcriptions of the interviews (INT) and focus groups (Focus groups with professionals -FGP- and Focus Groups with Biological parents -FGB) in order to emphasize the findings.

Information related to the reasons for family separation

Findings demonstrate that most children interviewed were not told about the reasons for moving them from their home. When family separation comes about, some adults just avoid giving information and details about what is really happening and what all the changes mean.

‘Well, they gave me almost no information, nothing more than I was going with my sister for a while, a little time, and that's it’. (Child. INT-3)

In a huge part of the cases, other adults, whether parents or professionals, tell children lies in order to hide the truth about the real situation. Generally, lies include saying that children will come back to the family home soon.

‘I supported my kid by telling him that nothing was going to happen because he would come home soon, although I knew I’d have problems’. (Mother)

However, all the children and most of professionals highly recommended not telling lies to children for four main reasons. Firstly, lying to children makes them feel that adults, especially professionals, will not deserve their trust anymore so it will make their relationship difficult in the future.

‘They can’t make a promise and then not fulfil it. After that, children won’t trust them, they think -you lied to me once, so...-’. (Child. INT-7)

Secondly, children state that lying to them not only makes them distrust adults but also makes them get angry, sad or frustrated when they discover the truth.

‘If children are going to live in a residential centre, they must know it, they shouldn’t be told that it’s just a little time and then they’ll be back with mum soon. If children are not coming back home ever, they should be told that too, because later children are going to suffer much more if they don’t know it from the beginning’. (Child. INT-9)

Thirdly, it is highly important not to forget that children usually tend to believe that they are the cause of bad incidents happening around them. They may feel guilty and responsible for everything that has happened and think that they have caused the family separation. In that sense, professionals should work on these emotions and beliefs to make children feel relieved and not responsible for what has happened.

‘Children have a great tendency to think -all this is happening because of me, something in me-, they blame themselves. It’s our job to say that that is not the case, so they can understand that the onus is on the adult, that the one who is not moving forward is the adult, regardless of whatever they have done’. (Professional. FGP-3)

The fourth reason to avoid lying to children is related to their right to know the truth and to not be deceived. In this regard, some professionals explained that some of the children come to the foster placement thinking that it is a temporary residence like a holiday. From their point of view, it is not fair for children to live this fake life; they must be aware of their real life.

‘Children must know why they are at the placement, because if not, they think it’s like a summer camp. It is important not to trick them’. (Professional)

Information related to the process prior to the foster care decision

Children are disconnected from the work and intervention process previously carried out by the protection services. This lack of participation causes an impact on children’s lives when they are required to leave their home, because they do not expect it and are not prepared for it.

‘They didn’t tell me before; they just sent me straight away’. (Child)

‘Well, to not take me away like that, because they took me from home, and it was as if someone had grabbed me by my shirt and thrown me into the streets. They didn’t give me any explanation and this affected me’. (Child)

Consequently, this general lack of information about the many changes that fostering will mean for their lives, plus the failure to understand the reason for family separation, explain many of the emotions they may experience: fear, insecurity, sadness, shock, confusion, bewilderment, impotency, anger. It has been observed that the less information children have, the greater the emotional impact and disorientation they experience when facing the process.

‘I’ll always remember the way they took him from me, with such a cruel, cold call and him saying -mum please, they brought me here and I don’t know where I am-’.
(Mother. FGB-5)

Information related to their rights as fostered children

It was observed that children have acquired little or no information regarding the legal aspects of the foster care process and the rights and obligations of each family member. They wish to have more information about their situation, but they do not ask because they are not aware that they have the right to be informed.

‘At the beginning it was a surprise, I needed more information, they told me I was going to spend the night at home and suddenly a professional came, all people dressed in green and I thought –What is going on? What are they doing to me? -’.
(Child)

Information related to the characteristics of the foster placement where they are going to live

Children receive little or no information about the fostering placement; neither about whether it will be a residential centre or a foster family. Nonetheless, the fact of showing and explaining children the place and people who they are going to live with helps children to be more adaptive and relieves them. Evidently, the few cases of children who knew their foster placement before entering it, reported positive opinions and experiences of it. It was found that explaining and accompanying children to placements may even be interesting for parents too.

‘We went one day to see the residential centre with my mum and my caseworker. I thought it looked really good; there was happiness and no misery or poverty. No way did I feel bad, forced or stressed, I didn’t see it as a prison’. (Child)

Some professionals go further and recommend not only showing the placement to children but also explaining and chatting about how children could take advantage of

it. This perspective makes children feel more secure and lets them be more involved in their own fostering process.

‘We talk to the children about the time they will spend in the centre, how to take advantage of it, what we can offer, what lessons, how they can be accompanied during this time’. (Professional. FGP-8)

Information related to the visitation schedule with their biological family

Visitation plans are not always shared with the children at the beginning of the fostering process. As said previously, some children think they are going to stay just a while in the foster placement, so they believe they will come back home and are not aware of the significance of visitation.

‘I wish they had told me, instead of telling me I was going to play, that I would be separated from my mother rather than I was going to play and later she would pick me up’. (Child)

Therefore, children complain about misinformation and express their interest and the usefulness of acquiring information regarding visitation. Some professionals agree with that and state that children should know about the contact plan and other practical aspects related to visitation. It affects children’s emotional management because it helps calm them and lowers their level of anxiety about seeing their family at the start of their fostering process.

‘Talking about visitation relieves both parents and children, it is really calming for them to speak about the schedule, telling them that from one day they will see each other fortnightly or every Saturday’. (Professional)

Good practices when informing children

As could be deduced, the main good practice is to inform children at the beginning of their foster process consists of giving them true and complete information about

the five issues described above. It applies to every child, even the younger ones, always considering their age and ability to understand when informing them.

‘They told us we were too young to know’. (Child)

It is important that all children understand all the information about these five topics but, as participants recommend, it is very helpful if they know it prior to their move into the foster placement. Professionals recommend taking as much time as needed to chat with parents and children and make them understand the whole future situation. As professionals realise through their own experience, it actually helps parents and children to be more relaxed and calmer.

‘Maybe the most important thing before the fostering starts is making the deal, this means, working with the whole family and talking about what is going on, which help we offer, the temporary nature of the process... it is important that both children and parents be aware of it’. (Professional)

In line with the previous recommendation, some professionals describe good experiences of a pre-entry in foster placements. This means, giving children details about the changes in their new lives but also showing them their new residence and the people that are going to be involved in their lives.

‘One thing that really works in some centres when it is not an urgent entry, is doing a pre-entry of children in the placement, where caseworkers explain to them which will be their bedroom, who are the other professionals involved, where they are going to sleep, so they are not afraid of the unknown’. (Professional)

However, transferring information is not enough for participants; as they state, how this type of information is given is of key importance. From the point of view of the participants, empathy is a key attitude that professionals should employ

when they are informing children. In that sense, children consider it crucial that professionals be sensitive to their situation and act according to it.

‘Don’t just put children away and that’s it. They should put themselves in our shoes and try to understand how they would feel if they were separated from their families’. (Child)

Showing empathy implies being involved in children’s emotions, taking their opinions seriously and listening to them carefully, trying not to hurt their feelings. It also implies being nice and friendly. Professionals highlight the importance of providing emotional support too, but not all professionals show these qualities.

‘There are some caseworkers.... Okay I understand, they have to keep somethings separate from others, but there are some caseworkers who make us feel that we are just a job for them’. (Child. INT-18)

Discussion

Results confirm that fostered children are still seen as objects of protection rather than subjects with rights who are capable of understanding their situation and being involved in their own fostering process. Children on the study do not even know of their right to be informed, as McCarthy (2016) also observed in his study, and this is a fact that hinders their participation in decision making (Bell, 2002; McCarthy, 2016; Pölkki et al., 2012) moreover this also goes against the recommendation of many authors (Havlicek et al., 2016; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Woolfson, Heffernan, Paul, & Brown, 2009).

In this regard, results indicate that children wish to be more informed in their fostering process, which is in line with findings obtained in other research projects

(Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, & Pastor, 2017;; Mateos, Vaquero, Balsells, & Ponce, 2017; Mcleod, 2007; Mitchell, Kuczynski, Tubbs, & Ross, 2010; Montserrat, 2014; Muench, Diaz, & Wright, 2017; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012; Nybell, 2013; Pölkki, Vornanen, Pursiainen, & Riikonen, 2012).

Particularly, this study focuses on the information that children need to receive at the beginning of their fostering process, when they arrive at the placement. As seen also in other studies, children were not consulted or told about the previous interventions with their family before being removed from their homes (Balsells et al., 2017; Mateos et al., 2017; Montserrat, 2014; Pölkki et al., 2012). Children were not sufficiently informed when they arrived at the foster placement. In fact data gathered highlights, some children were even fooled by adults who told them they were going to spend just a little time at the placement, like a “summer holiday camp”.

At this crucial moment of arriving at the placement, children were not told about key aspects related to: a) the real reasons for family separation; b) the interventions which were carried out before removing them from their home; c) their rights as fostered children; d) the characteristics of the foster placement; e) the visitation schedule. These findings broaden, complement and support what has been observed in previous research projects about informational needs of children at the beginning of their fostering process (Mateos et al., 2017; Montserrat, 2014; Pölkki et al., 2012).

The relevance of knowing this information lies in children’s rights to be informed but also because literature shows that this knowledge: a) raises the likelihood of successful interventions (Barnes, 2012; Bessell, 2011; Del Valle & Fuertes, 2007; Mcleod, 2007; Schofield, 2005; Triseliotis et al., 1995), b) empowers children and facilitates their wellbeing (Bessell, 2011; Goodyer, 2014; Husby et al., 2018; Leeson, 2007; Martin, 2011; McCarthy, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2010; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012;

Schofield, 2005; Ungar, 2013); c) and decreases feelings of uncertainty and insecurity (Montserrat, 2014; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012).

In this study it could be observed that being informed about the mentioned topics helps children to avoid feelings such as guilt for what happened, disorientation and fear of the unknown, and anxiety to see their family again. Therefore, receiving these explanations helps children understand why the foster care decision was taken, who made the decision, how long the placement will last, where and with whom the children will live, when they will have visits, etc. Consequently, the perception and awareness of the problem is more realistic and appropriate, which is crucial to children's emotional management (Goodyer, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2010) and for avoiding feelings of guilt (Ellingsen et al., 2011).

These reasons explain the need for professionals to develop good practices to adequately inform children. As literature has highlighted, professionals have a key role to ensure that children are informed and participate in their fostering process (Bell, 2002; Husby et al., 2018; McCarthy, 2016; Mcleod, 2007;).

Children must know the truth and the complexity of the whole situation in order to be able to adapt to it. Thus, it is important that professionals inform children of each aspect outlined above, taking into account their age and capacity for understanding (Muench et al., 2017; Murphy & Jenkinson, 2012; Pölkki et al., 2012) but also showing empathy and emotional support, as observed in the results. These findings are in line with Husby et al. (2018) recommendations about getting closer to children to communicate and explain information to them.

Finally, good practice is needed when informing children that is based on anticipation. Different benefits were perceived when children were informed about the

fostering changes before family separation happened, and when they visited the foster placement and knew it well prior to moving there.

In conclusion, informing children in a proper way is an important challenge for child care professionals, even before they move in to foster placement. According to Pölkki et al. (2012), children's participation is one of the main challenges of child welfare services and is also a challenge for children.

However, participation is not only giving children information. There are also issues around power, who relays information, the manner its delivered in, the format and who says what, when and how. Similarly, participation means more than informing. In order to achieve real participation, the voice of childhood should be incorporated at different levels, as indicated by Bouma, López, Knorth, and Grietens (2018): a) informing - Children should be adequately informed as a prerequisite for participation; b) hearing- Children should have the option and be encouraged to express their views; c) involving, children's views should be considered when making decisions.

All this suggests the need to continue investigating how to incorporate the voice of children in the Protection System. Future research could be based on the perspective of fostered children, their families and their caseworkers but with different characteristics or profiles. The current study selected those families and children who collaborated with caseworkers and were reunified or had a plan for reunification in a maximum of two months. However, asking other families and children with no plan or experiences of returning home could offer other different perspectives of the fostering process. Moreover, also asking families and children at the start of the fostering process may give us another point of view of the situation.

Limitations of the study and future research

The present research project helps to spread children's voices and allows the understanding of what is important to them at the earliest stage of their fostering situation. The study complements children's opinions and experiences with the adults' voices however, the percentage of children who were involved in the study is significantly lower than adults (30 children and 105 adults). This is due to the fact that few children were able to participate in the study, which means a limitation of the scope of the research. Maybe with the voices of a large number of children the result could be richer in some points.

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