Psicothema

The biological family from the perspective of kinship fostered adolescents

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Abstract

Background: Previous studies emphasise the importance of the biological family to the welfare of fostered adolescents. However, the majority of these studies only take into consideration the viewpoints of the professionals, foster parents and biological parents, not those of the adolescents themselves. For this reason little is known about the perceptions the adolescents have and the needs they express. **Method:** This study has gathered data from 57 adolescents in kinship family foster care in Spain (AFE). The study applied qualitative reseach, using focus groups to gather data, and the Atlas.ti programme to analyse the data. The qualitative data give us a more profound understanding of how the fostered adolescents relate to their biological families. **Results:** The results highlight the specific needs of these adolescents with regard to: a) understanding of their family history, b) the impact of visits from and relationship with their biological family, and c) the relationship between the biological family and the foster family. **Conclusions:** These findings reveal implications to consider when creating support programmes aimed at this group.

Keywords: kinship foster care, fostered adolescents, biological family, specific needs.

Resumen

La familia biológica desde la perspectiva del adolescente acogido en familia extensa. **Antecedentes:** los estudios anteriores demuestran la importancia que tiene la familia biológica en el bienestar de los adolescentes acogidos. Ahora bien, la mayoría de estos estudios se han realizado tomando como informantes a profesionales, acogedores o padres biológicos y han dejado de lado la perspectiva de los adolescentes. Así pues, conocemos poco sobre cómo es percibido este tema por los propios adolescentes y cuáles son las necesidades que expresan al respecto. **Método:** la investigación recoge información de 57 adolescentes en situación de acogimiento familiar en familia extensa en España (AFE). La metodología del estudio es cualitativa, se utiliza la técnica del focus grup para recoger información y el programa Atlas.ti para el análisis de datos. Los datos cualitativos nos permiten profundizar en la visión de los adolescentes acogidos en torno al tema de la familia biológica. **Resultados:** los resultados nos indican necesidades particulares en torno a: a) la comunicación de la historia familiar, b) las visitas y la relación con su familia biológica, y c) la relación entre familia biológica y acogedora. **Conclusiones:** estos hallazgos sugieren implicaciones para la práctica que pasan por articular programas de apoyo específicos dirigidos a este colectivo.

Palabras clave: acogimiento en familia extensa, adolescentes acogidos, familia biológica, necesidades particulares.

The most recent child protection policies have revolutionized their approach, giving voice to those children directly involved and encouraging feedback about the issues that affect them. This new approach is also evident from the investigative research carried out in the sphere of child protection. With this in mind, this article highlights the special needs which children in kinship foster care have with regard to their biological families (from now on referred to as BF).

Kinship foster care (from now on referred to KFC) is the most common child protection option here in Spain (Del Valle, López, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2009, 2010; López, Montserrat, del Valle, & Bravo, 2010) and one of the most common in other countries

(Berrick, Barht, & Nedell, 1994; Geen, 2003). The BF is, therefore, one of the key drivers influencing family fostering, affecting the child's adaptation. The BF's progress and their recovery will be a deciding factor in the reunification of fostered children with their biological parents (Balsells, Amorós, Fuentes-Peláez, & Mateos, 2011). Study of previous research literature has revealed that very little is known about the views of fostered adolescents (Mateos, Balsells, Molina, & Fuentes-Peláez, 2012).

What has been established is that the welfare of fostered adolescents is closely related to factors concerning the BF such as: the understanding the fostered adolescents have of their own family history, the relationship they have with their BF, and the relationship that exists between the families (biological and foster).

The understanding fostered adolescents have of their own family history

Young people in foster care have to face far greater challenges than those generally experienced by adolescents who are very

focused on affirming their own identity. The majority of fostered adolescents have complex and painful family histories which they struggle to accept (Altshuler, 1999). Their parents are, or have been, drug users, a problem often coexisting with issues such as those of mental health, lack of parenting skills, criminality and domestic violence (Miller, Fisher, Fetrow, & Jordan, 2006). All these situations undoubtedly leave their mark on the adolescent and their family history. It becomes harder for children to understand and accept their family history during adolescence with its crises of identity provoking questions about the past, present and future (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Hening, 1992). These questions are even more challenging when the knowledge they have about their past is limited or distorted, as is often the case in long term fostering (Wilson, Sinclair, Taylor, Pithouse, & Sellick, 2004).

Visits and relationship with the biological family

In general, it is agreed that maintaining family visits during the foster period has a positive impact on children (Cantos, Gries, & Slis, 1997; Colon, 1997; Hess, 1998; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000). Colon (1997) found that the visits help build self-esteem and healthy emotional development. Cantos et al. (1997) found that the benefits are evident in the emotional adaptation and behavior of the foster children. Their study reveals that there are fewer behavioral problems and a better emotional adaptation when the visits are more frequent. Leathers (2003) resists this view and criticizes previous studies. She doubts that visits are unequivocally beneficial for the foster children. She suggests that the visits have to be evaluated using a combination of factors, studying not only their frequency, but other influencial circumstances, such as how the child relates to his parents, the attitude the foster family have towards the visits and the length of time the child has been in foster care. In-depth analysis is crucial because the whole issue of visits is highly complex. In this light, the conclusions drawn by Leathers (2003) are contrary to previous studies, in that she has noted that visits put the foster child in a potentially difficult situation due to the conflict of loyalties associated with the visits.

Furthermore, a study carried out in the Basque Country concludes that the perception the child has of how their foster family (from now on referred to as FF) accepts the relationship and the emotional links the child has with the BF have a significant bearing on how well the child integrates into the FF, and thus on the wellbeing of the child (Balluerka, Gorostiaga, Herce, & Rivero, 2002).

Kufeldt, Armstrong and Dorosh (1995) and also Messing (2006) carried out some of the few studies which have focused on the viewpoints of the fostered adolescents. In the former study, those interviewed described how the (BF) relationship was affected by the frequency of the visits: more frequent visits increased their feelings for their biological parents and decreased the emotional involvement with the foster parents. In the latter study, the 40 adolescents who participated in 8 discussion groups expressed how they felt disillusioned about the relationship with their biological families, although they still hoped that one day their mothers would be able to take responsibility for them again. Amorós and Palacios (2004) add to this the importance of setting out a clear parents' visit plan for the fostered adolescents to enable them to form realistic expectations of these visits and help them understand the objectives of the visits.

Relationships between the foster family and the biological family

In cases of kinship family fostering it has also been observed that the relationship between the BF and the FF has a direct influence on the wellbeing of the foster child (Baker, McHale, Strozier, & Cecil, 2010; Cantos et al., 1997). When there is a conflictive relationship between the BF and the FF, children experience hugely ambivalent feelings: happiness about seeing their parents conflicts with the guilt of betraying their foster family, whom they also love (Cantos et al., 1997).

Balluerka et al. (2002) point out that how the child perceives the relationship the FF have with his/her biological parents directly affects the way he/she settles into the foster situation.

An important aspect of this relationship is communication. Due to their emotional ties with the BF, the kinship foster families often find it difficult to discuss certain issues with the foster children such as family history, the foster situation and the causes behind it. Jiménez, Martínez, Muñoz and León (gone to press) carried out a study on this issue with a sample of 189 kinship foster families. Their study concluded that the difficulties in discussing the family history and the contributing factors which led to foster care have a direct effect on the success of the foster situation and the wellbeing of the foster children. When the foster children can speak freely about their foster situation they make more satisfactory progress.

The aims behind this study are to identify the special needs that fostered adolescents have with regard to their biological families, and to guide the welfare professionals in the support they give to these foster children through educational group support activities.

Method

Participants

The study gathered data from adolescents in kinship family foster care across Spain. 57 adolescents from 8 autonomous regions in Spain took part in the study, with an average age of 15 (min.13 and max.18). There were considerably more girls than boys: 32 girls and 25 boys. 54.38% of the adolescents were being fostered by grandparents, 43.85% by uncles and aunts and the rest by other relations such as cousins or brothers and sisters. The average time they had spent in foster care was 7 years.

Instruments

The study uses qualitative research, collecting information via focus groups enabling adolescents in kinship fostering to express their views. A focus group interview formed the basis of the study, with open questions addressing foster care - whether adolescents were aware of what foster care signifies, and their personal understanding and evaluation of the situation during their time in foster care.

As well as the focus group interview, an information sheet was created to summarise socio-demographic details of each participating adolescent (age, sex, relationship with the foster family and the length of time in foster care) as a summary reference for the focus group.

Procedure

The following criteria were taken into account when selecting adolescents to participate in the study: a) socio-demographic

characteristics, preferably boys and girls aged between 12 and 16 years; b) a range of relationships with the foster family to represent the current diversity of kinship fostering; c) a minimum fostering period of a year with that family prior to the study, and d) an absence of physical or psychological handicaps in the adolescents which could restrict their participation in group discussion.

During 2008, a total of 8 focus groups were formed (consisting of 5-8 adolescents per group) in 8 autonomous regions. The professional staff in each region were responsible for selecting the adolescents according to the stipulated criteria. Each group was led by local staff who were already familiar to the adolescents, and the information asked for was based on a questionnaire and adhered to ethical standards of informed consent and confidentiality.

Data analysis

All the information recorded was transcribed and an exhaustive process of content analysis was carried out to define categories and subcategories. Bottom-up content analysis was applied: the first stage of analysis was textual, selecting paragraphs, fragments and significant quotes from the transcription papers. The second stage was conceptual, to identify categories and subcategories which could be inter-related. Both stages were carried out and subjected to peer review and categories and subcategories were defined when data reached saturation. The software Atlas.ti 5.0 was used for the qualitative data processing. A Hermeneutic Unit Editor was created in which the literal transcriptions of the focus group (*primary documents*) were included, each category and subcategory was given a code (*code*) and textual notes were also included (*memos*). A conceptual network (*network*) was created to analyse the data as a basis for the connections established between the codes of the hermeneutic unit and the research on adolescents in kinship foster care and the BF.

The study codes distinguish between the following themes: a) family history: 1. Knowledge the foster child has about kinship fostering 2. The motives for kinship fostering and 3. How knowledge about kinship foster care was imparted and by whom; b) BF and the foster child: 1. Relationship with the biological family, contacts and visits, 2. Emotional links; and c) Relationship between FF and BF: 1. Conflictive situations 2. Evaluation of what adolscents' quality of life would be like if they were with their biological parents.

Results

The awareness and contact the adolescents have with their past

Some of the adolescents were able to clearly express that they were fostered due to a series of problems in their families which meant their parents could not look after them (they mention mostly drug addiction, a death of one or both parents, illness and other problems).

However, despite these statements, in all the discussion groups a clear need to understand the history of their separation is expressed. Adolescents want to be told the motives behind the separation and the reasons behind their present situation. It also seems that the information they have about the kinship foster care programme is limited, imprecise or even non-existent. All the groups expressed how little information they had about fostering. Adolescents expressed a lack of knowledge about what it signified, its duration, its implications, and they even had incorrect information:

"They should tell you the truth and explain why your parents had to leave you." (Group from Asturias, from now on referred to as G_A).

"I'm not sure what being fostered means." (Group from Madrid, from now on referred to as G_M).

In kinship fostering, as the child is fostered by his/her extensive family (usually with grandparents or uncles and aunts) it is taken for granted that they are aware of their family history, the reasons behind the fostering, what fostering means and that the child has the opportunity to speak openly about his/her parents because they form part of the same family. However, many adolescents in kinship foster care, especially those fostered at a very young age, do not know their own family history. They see it as a delicate subject for the foster family which prevents them from talking about it openly. They don't know how to approach their uncles, aunts or grandparents for information about their parents or the reasons behind the separation. They admit that it is a subject they would like to talk about in their foster home but they have difficulty doing so. None of them said they would like information about their past provided by anyone outside the family, from welfare staff for example.

"I want to know more about my parents but I daren't ask." (Group of Galicia, from now on referred to as G_G).

"I suppose they don't talk about it because they don't know how to." (G_A).

Visits and relationship with biological parents

The quality and quantity of visits between the fostered children and their parents is an important issue which is brought up in all the focus groups.

The relationships the adolescents have with their BF were found to be very varied. It was observed that some of them maintain visits and contact, although in varying ways, while others have no contact whatsoever. Among those who have contact, some consider the visits as positive and others as problematic. Those in the latter group refer to the following three main problems: aggression during the visit, the lack of understanding about the supervision of the visit and the latent conflict between the foster family and the parents. This last problem, which has been referred to previously, is especially found in kinship family foster care. If there has been a history of conflict between those fostering and the parents then it is a constant problem in this type of foster care. If the visits are to be at all satisfactory they have to take place outside the home of the foster family:

"Who is in charge, my grandmother or my mother?… Yes, I want visits, why do they have to control them?" (Group from the Balearic Islands, from now on referred to as G_B).

"The visits with my mother are good but we have to see each other outside my grandparents' house or else they argue a lot." (Group from Castilla La Mancha, from now on referred to as G_CLM).

The adolescents talk about two issues which create barriers and impede the development of a relationship between them and their parents. One is the frequency and length of the visits, and the

other the inconsistency of the parents in keeping up the visits and contact. It is found that the adolescents considered the frequency to be insufficient and should be increased:

> "They're short, I see him once a week and it should be longer." (Group from the Canary Islands, from now on referred to as G_C).

There were also cases where, although there was an established visit programme, the parents did not adhere to it. Despite the emotional harm produced when the parents do not adere to the visit programme, when they do meet the adolescents talk about them with positive feelings:

> "I like seeing them when they visit, even though they don't always come. They arrive late and sometimes they say they'll come and they don't." (G_B).

Finally, there are cases that have no contact due to the reason for the abandonment. There are also children who say they want to keep up the contact, even to the extent that they organize the meetings themselves, without getting much response from their parents. They admit that this is a very painful experience. It is evident that the adolescents want to maintain a relationship with their parents despite the difficult circumstances they have experienced. They long to improve their emotional relationship with their parents, to be considered important by them and to receive more affection.

> "I've tried to keep up the visits with my father, I gave him my phone number, but if I don't phone him, he doesn't take any notice of me. He's pushed me aside many times. I hate it." (G_C).

Relationships between the foster family and the biological family

It is known that a complementary and collaboratory relationship between the FF and the BF would give the foster children a sense of relief as well as giving support to the FF in the adaptation process. Also, when talking about cases of temporary foster care it is fundamental that both families respect personal difficulties and take a positive approach to the possibility of change. Nevertheless, the relationship between the FF and the BF in cases of kinship foster care can be emotionally complex and not always cooperative.

It is also clear that one of the most important factors when considering the relationship between the families (biological and foster) are their attitudes towards visits. The data have shown that this attitude is not always positive. The lack of dialogue between the families creates rivalries, sacrificing the wellbeing of the adolescents and distancing the BF. It is worth noting that though the adolescents want to see their parents more frequently, they remember what life was like with them, and recognize that their present life in foster care is better. However, those who were adopted very young and have no point of reference for comparison say that they do not know what life would be like with their parents:

> "I'm better now than when I was with my parents." (G_C).
> "I've lived all my life with my aunt and I don't know if I would be better off with my parents." (G_C).

Conclusions

This study sets out the opinions of the adolescents in kinship foster care on a subject as important as the BF. Their viewpoint helps to widen the knowledge we have about the subject, and the authors agree with Wilson et al. (2004) when they point out that there are special needs related to foster care and the precarious past of these adolescents. The study has also allowed us to recognize other important needs related to the BF which are specific to adolescents in kinship foster care.

Previous studies have pointed out how important it is for the adolescents to have information and to be prepared for the changes they have to experience (Fuentes & Amorós, 2008; Jiménez, Martínez, & Mata, 2010, Jiménez et al., gone to press). With respect to the personal background of the foster children in this study, it is observed that many did not know the reasons for being in foster care, and that they found it difficult to express their doubts openly to their foster families, thinking they would hurt their feelings. The adolescents think that their lack of information and knowledge about their own past is because their foster families do not have the resources to approach the subject. Regarding family history, there were two issues which create barriers: firstly, the conflict of loyalties described by the fostered adolescents which made it difficult for them to ask the FF direct and frank questions, and secondly, a belief that the foster families were not capable of discussing the subject.

In the first case, Leathers (2003) notes that the conflict of loyalties is more frequent in cases of long-term foster care, when contact with the BF is also maintained. These two characteristics coincide with the type of kinship foster care in our context (Del Valle et al., 2010; Montserrat, 2008) which leads to the conclusion that the conflict of loyalties is one of the main concerns of adolescents in kinship foster care.

Regarding the second point, the opinions the adolescents express about the difficulties the foster families have in discussing the subject of the BF and their past make it evident that there is a need for training for the foster families to address this issue (Amorós et al., 2008; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000). Fulfilling these needs would improve family relationships and provide a more positive outcome for the foster children (Jiménez et al., gone to press).

Another important issue highlighted in this study is the urgent need to address the subject of visits and the relationship with biological parents. The following points are outlined: a) a conflictive relationship between the families has a negative effect on the adolescents' feelings towards the visits. The role of the foster families is important in the progress of the visits (Balsells et al., 2011). On occasion this role is confusing and is no different from that of the biological parents, creating more confusion than clarity in the relationships (Jiménez & Palacios, 2008). b) As also stated by Messing (2006), visits can generate positive or negative reactions in the adolescents, or a combination of both. This data reaffirms Leather's view (2003), since she questions whether all the visits are beneficial for the children. She recommends re-examining the subject of vists from a multidimensional view, including qualitative studies that indicate the resulting progress and impact the visits have on the lives of the children. c) The adolescent does not understand the reasons behind establishing a programme of visits and contacts. In general, the adolescent is excluded from these decisions as they are considered to be the experts' domain. However, recent regulations draw attention to the

obligation to involve the child in decisions which concern him/her (Fuentes-Peláez, 2011).

There is also a third point which recognises the wish for an emotional link with the BF. The adolescents express clearly that they want their biological parents to fulfill their emotional needs, despite recognizing that it is their foster families who do this in reality. If these needs are satisfied it has a positive effect on their self-esteem and self-image, and also, according to Balluerka et al. (2002), it is a positive sign of integration into the foster family. These wishes are particular to children in protection, who often idealize their biological parents, modeling them on what they expect and desire of a father or mother (Cerezo, 1995). Rodríguez, Triana and Hernández (2005) explain this idealization: as the contact they have is infrequent, the children need to build an image of their parents and paradoxically they attribute characteristics to them that the parents have never embodied.

Lastly, it has emerged from the study that there is a need for communication, whether it be between parents and children or other people close to them who give them support. This need is especially important (Jiménez et al., gone to press; Messing, 2006) as it is currently recognized as a basic premise of protection and wellbeing, to have somebody who will listen and offer support and understanding (Bravo & Del Valle, 2003). The aim should be to offer a network of support in this area, not only in the form of instrumental support but also emotional.

The adolescents in kinship family foster care have shown us how they experience fostering in the environment of their BF. They tell us that foster care has offered them a series of opportunities, but at the same time they expose a complex way of family life which leads to particular challenges. Taking into account the difficulties involved, it is essential that these young people can rely on good support and resources, which recognise the special needs they express, and provide means for self expression. For this reason it is crucial that all support programs encourage the full participation of the adolescents, encouraging a dialogue and exchange of views about their experiences (Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez, Mateo, Mateos, & Violant, 2010). Wherever possible, the adolescents should become involved in the processes of decision-making which affect them, and especially in issues related to the BF such as visits and contacts. Furthermore, as many of the adolescents' needs depend on their foster families, for example the FF ability to explain the child's family history and their foster situation, it is evident that the FF need support and training in these issues. The progress of the foster families will consequently bring about an improvement in the educational, psychological and social development, and thus the wellbeing of the adolescents (Jiménez et al, gone to press). Finally, it must be noted that this study focuses on a very specific form of foster care (kinship), a specific agegroup (adolescence), and a discrete geographical area (Spain). Because of these limitations, it is recommended that further studies would be necessary to incorporate the perspective of other groups of children, in order to expand the range of responses, so enhancing the welfare of children in protection.

Acknowledgements

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