
SOCIAL ADAPTATION FEATURES OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

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(Received 5 October 2014)

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the leading theoretical concepts, reflecting the specificity of the ‘social integration’ concept from the interdisciplinary approach, and the results of an empirical study of the factors influencing the process of children’s social adaptation in foster care, based on interviews with foster parents (N = 10) and foster children aged 10-17 years (N = 35). The results of the study suggest that the focused state social policy, improving of social services for families and children, more careful selection and introduction of compulsory training for prospective parents, forming a positive image of foster families in public opinion can improve the level of social adaptation of all members of the foster family and contribute to its successful functioning in the society.

Keywords: social adaptation, foster family, orphans, sociological research, Russia

1. Introduction

Adaptive abilities of a person are the subject of many sciences such as Biology, Psychology, Sociology, etc. In this regard, in our view, the social adaptation of orphans must be considered from the perspective of an interdisciplinary approach, focusing on the biological, psychological, social and cultural factors that directly affect its success.

From the Biology point of view, adaptation can be seen as a way of organisms’ reaction to environmental influences, their evolutionary development through adaptive changes, through their adjustment to external conditions [1-3].

In Psychology, social adaptation of orphans is most closely considered in: attachment theory [4-6], theory of interpersonal relations [7-8] and deprivation theory [9].

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In particular, Rene Spitz, who coined the term 'hospitalism', experimentally proved that babies in children's homes, deprived of maternal care, faced the violation of instinctual life, the ego, cognitive and motor development, and in extreme cases it leads to the child death [5].

In Sociology, the term 'adaptation' is viewed as a process of human exploration of a new social situation in which he/she and the environment have an active influence on each other from the perspective of multiple approaches.

From the perspective of systemic approach the processes of adaptation is determined as a social system function [10]. T. Parsons equates adaptation and the balance of power in society. Society in equilibrium is a society without conflict, where everyone acts according to a given role. Therefore, social adaptation is seen as a balance between the needs, interests and values of the individual and the social environment.

As part of the regulatory approach, the main focus is on the passive role of the individual in the process of adaptation to social reality [11, 12]. E. Durkheim considers the structure of society as a set of social factors, the internal environment of the company, consisting of material/spiritual values and social environment, trying to explain their impact on various social processes [11]. In this regard, we can say that the various specific historical periods of the society's attitude towards orphans affected the success of their social adaptation.

Basic levels of adaptation in Social science are considered to be: focused conformism – when a person agrees with the requirements of the social environment and at the same time continues to maintain its system of values [13]; mutual tolerance in which the interaction of subjects exhibits mutual forbearance to the values and behaviours of each other (J. Schepansky) [14]; the accommodation as one of the most common forms of social adaptation, which is based on tolerance, mutual concessions and assumes the value of human society and the recognition of the subject property adaptable social environment [14]; and assimilation, when a person completely abandons his/her former values and assumes the new ones [15].

2. Main part

The aim of the present empirical study is to identify the factors influencing the process of social adaptation of children in foster care. As researchers seek to understand more about social adaptation of children in foster care, recent attention has been given to the importance of examining the perspectives of foster families regarding their circumstances and services they receive. The object of the study was adoptive families, asking for the adaptation of foster children during the first year. Subject of investigation was factors affecting the social adaptation of children living in a foster family.

3. Methods

Leading research methods were document analysis (the study of individual cases of foster children and parents) and the survey (interviews with foster parents and children). The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first goal was to explore the foster parents' opinion about the process of social adaptation of foster children under their care. The second goal was to interview foster children, living in foster care.

To recruit participants, workers from child welfare agencies in Saratov region were asked to contact foster families who care for children during the first year. These families were given a call and asked to contact the research team directly if they were interested in participating. Purposive sampling was then used to identify 10 foster families who met the study's criteria. The eligibility requirements for foster parents were: (a) the parents were between the ages of 30 and 55 years; (b) foster children stay in the family up to one year; (c) the family had no prior involvement with legal or/and child welfare system; (d) the absence of consanguinity between foster parents and foster children; (e) all adoptive families, participating in the study, complete and made in officially registered marriage. Seven families have their own children ages from 9 to 25 years, the rest of the families have no biological children.

During the formal interviews, researchers paid attention to the biological children opinion regarding of taking foster children to the family. Two foster parents reported that they met the understanding and support from their own children, two families faced with some caution, the other two met the direct resistance from their own child/children, and one parent had a neutral attitude towards the adoption of foster children because the biological children had grown up and lived by their own.

The main motives behind the adoptive parents to the decision were: 'desire to help orphaned child' (3 families), 'the absence of their own children' (3 families), 'our own children are grown up' (4 families).

According to the survey, foster parent training before taking the foster child/children to the family, included visits - held only by three foster families, the rest of foster families claim that they had preliminary talks with a social worker and/or a psychologist from the social agency for families and children 'Family'. However, these conversations were sporadic and, according to the respondents, could not fill the gaps in knowledge about the peculiarities of the orphans' behaviour, living in residential institutions for a long time.

Answering the question 'Did you think if you were well prepared for taking a foster child?' three of respondents marked their attitude as 'well prepared' and seven as 'not enough'. Despite this, all ten foster families would like to receive an additional training regarding education, communication and development of foster children.

In addition, almost all foster parents argued that they made preparations for the coming foster child in the family (a children's room, bought toys, books, household items, etc., had discussions with other family members and relatives).

The most significant help, according to foster parents, they had from the social services staff as well as representatives of the guardianship authorities.

From an interview with the adoptive parents, researchers found that the foster parents faced significant changes in the rhythm of life, the family atmosphere, and habits of family members with the appearance of the foster child/children. On the one hand, parents noted positive, joyful feelings in connection with the emergence of a new family member, laying on the hopes and expectations on him/her that were not able to realize in the past. On the other hand, most foster parents had experienced a heightened sense of anxiety and responsibility for the 'stranger' child, fear of 'do something wrong', 'cannot cope with their professional role'. This was described by one mom when she shared: "The first time when Kostya must be brought to my house, I myself could not find a place. I was kept thinking how it would be... But when I saw him I immediately realized that this is a good boy, though he was very thin, and had a clogged look... I took his hand and said, 'Well, let me show you your room'. He nodded his head and smiled ... And in the evening he felt like at home."

One of the most important factors in the process of the child social adaptation in foster care is the extent of its adoption by foster parents. The term 'adopting' is seen as a positive attitude to the person with adequate perception of his/her advantages and disadvantages.

The adaptation process is extremely important because it is the basis for the formation of the relationship between the adoptive parents and the child. Therefore, parents need from the outset to form a positive attitude toward communication and interaction with the foster child. In addition, during the interviews, some foster parents pointed to the emergence of feelings of helplessness about the fact that the child appeared in the family was not a child they imagined and who did not match their previous ideas and expectations (regarding to the appearance, manner of speaking, laughing, dressing, behaving, etc.). From an interview with the foster mother (female, 38 years): "I guess I was too naive from the very beginning. I wanted everything at once, but it did not happen ... I wanted the child to love me immediately as he saw me. Instead, he was rude to me; he didn't want to listen to anything. I faced with his aggression any time when I force him to do something (to clean his room, go to wash, etc.). Sometimes I think that I made a big mistake when I took him out of the orphanage. I can't deal with it. But he is only six years old! I just do worse to him and to myself ... I wanted to do so much for him, but he didn't need it. He can't or he does not want to evaluate my efforts."

Egocentrism of foster parents, their unrealistic expectations, the lack of training and knowledge about the process of social adaptation of foster children who live in residential institutions for a long time, significantly reduce the effectiveness of mutual social adaptation of all members of foster family, which is accompanied by conflicts, quarrels, recriminations, until complete rejection of the child and return it to the full government support.

In addition, when upbringing orphans, foster parents face with other difficulties, the most common of which include: child behaviour problems (disobedience, moods, stubbornness), the lack of basic sanitation and hygiene practices; disrespect towards others (inappropriate remarks against strangers or adults, indecent gestures); emotional 'deafness'; family quarrels with biological children; conflict relationships with others; unwillingness to work or help around the house.

Foster parents play an important role in improving the quality of interaction between the foster child and his/her biological parents. Modern studies of foreign scientists show that over the past few years, the number of contacts between children living in foster care and their biological parents has increased significantly: 40-50% of children met with their mothers weekly, 14-17% had no contact with their families because of the risk of negative effects due to physical absence or unwillingness of parents to communicate [16]. The modern social policy in England and Wales based on the principle of active interaction of foster children with their biological parents, which allows the latter to fulfil their parental responsibilities, gives the child a sense of connection with family members, increases the chances of the reunification [17]. However, recent studies have shown that contacts with the biological parents have a negative impact on the psychological and social well-being of foster children, negatively affect their behaviour, and violate the relationship between them and foster parents [18]. Also foster parents have different opinions regarding children's communication with their biological parents, paying attention to the negative impact on children's development [19].

There are different points of view on the impact of contacts between children and their natural parents in the scientific literature. Some researchers state that it is necessarily to take into account such factors as a type of care (short-term or long-term), a plan for a child to return to their biological parents as well as his/her age in regards to the reunification [20].

In Sinclair, Baker, Wilson, Gibbs's study of 596 foster children, that maintained a pattern of visiting when there is no plan for the child to return home, there was no strong evidence of increase the probability of returning home. They argued that visits between children living in care and their natural parents are associated with return home, but it is not at all clear that they cause it [21].

The longitudinal study of Barber and Delfabbro, conducted in South Australia, found that the evidence shows children who get along well with their biological families and who were in care as a result of less serious problems tended to have more frequent contact with their parents and were likely to return home sooner. They suggested that visiting also helps children enhance their psychological well-being, prevent unhelpful idealization of birth parents, settle in their placement, reduce the risk of disruption as well as gain an understanding of their origins and maintain their cultural identity [22].

Some researchers argued that the contact between birth families and children in long-term care may not be beneficial. The main reasons are the following: the family contact can place considerable emotional strain on children by reminding them of the separation; it can make a conflict between biological and foster parents; it can increase social worker workloads and increase conflicts between parents and children [23].

In Sinclair's studies, 24% of foster parents pointed to 'huge difficulties' in dealing with the biological parents of foster children because of their manifestations of aggression, negative impact on the child's behaviour, the invasion of the relationship with the foster parents [24]. Most adoptive parents have expressed a desire to receive various types of assistance from social workers, especially regarding the organization of contacts with biological parents.

Recent studies, conducted in England and Wales using qualitative and quantitative methods on the total sample in 1405 foster families, revealed, that the most popular forms of assistance were: the help of social worker with organizing of contacts between biological and foster parents (67.8%), elimination of emotional and behavioural problems of the foster children (63.5%), learning disabilities (40.7%) and health problems (29%) [25].

Our study showed that adaptation of foster children occurs more successfully in those foster families where parents hold democratic parenting style, give the child the right to be independent, without prejudice to his rights, and at the same time demanding implementation of manageable duties. Authoritarian parents, who afraid to look 'nonprofessional', try to limit foster children with the number of rules and demonstrate formal communication with them. Unfortunately, this approach does not give positive results because the child feels embittered, becomes overly aggressive, conflict, or, on the contrary, becomes insecure, passive, and non-self.

In addition to the survey of foster parents, and a survey of thirty five foster children ages of 10 to 17 was conducted. The main reasons for children to be in care were: troubles in the biological family due to alcoholism, drug addiction, unemployment, immoral and criminal behaviour of blood parents, as well as ill-treatment (80%); the deprivation of parental rights (14.2%); the result of a difficult situation in the birth family (5.7%).

To the question: 'Do you like living in a foster home?' 42.8% of the children chose the answer 'yes, very much'; 34.2% – 'certainly, yes'; 14.3% of respondents gave the answer 'not everything' and 8.5% of children were undecided.

It is clear, that for a more successful social adaptation of children in foster care it is necessary to conduct the preliminary preparatory work in order to familiarize a foster child with the foster parents, to establish positive relationships between them, to assimilate him/her with certain rules and norms of behaviour that exist in each family.

From the survey of children aged 10-17 we found that 54.3% of them had a rather vague idea of what awaits them outside the orphanage at the time of arrival in the foster family, despite talk to the staff (psychologist, teacher, educator). Most of them wanted to have a family and did not think about the possible difficulties and disappointments, due to the lack of experience and age.

In addition, the study showed that almost all children initially ignored the existing emotional ties established in the family, and could not assess the impact of one family member to the others, their hierarchy. Gradually, at the end of the first year they became to perceive their place in the family structure more adequately and to understand the family rules applicable to them.

4. Conclusion

Research studies have demonstrated the great impact of foster parent training on improving parent attitudes, parent-child interactions, and reduction of child problem behaviour that can increase the stability of placement of foster children themselves as well as foster parent retention. In recent years contacts between children living in care and their biological parents have assumed a much higher profile than ever before that demand the clear criteria regarding its frequency and assessment of its quality as well as new technology for social work practice.

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