

IDENTIFICATION OF THE BENEFITS OF CARE ABOUT CHILDREN IN PROFESSIONAL FAMILIES IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

In the Slovak Republic, the Act No. 305/2005 Coll. on social and legal protection of children and social care defines the provision of care for children who have been removed from their biological families and placed in children's homes. From 1 January 2009 this Act determines that every child within three years of being placed in a children's home should be placed in a professional family that creates a family environment for children with institutional care. The aim of the paper is to identify and describe the benefits performance of professional parenting from the perspective of professional parents as well as staff of children's homes. The research method was a questionnaire which was distributed to children's homes in all counties in the Slovak Republic. The questionnaire contained the statements describing the possible benefits of professional parenting, and the participants evaluated them on the 5-point Likert-type scale. The research results revealed statistically significant differences in perception of 13 out of 16 monitored areas of benefits between the professional parents and the staff of children's homes. In the areas where statistically significant differences have been demonstrated, the professional parents perceived themselves as more profitable than the staff of children's homes. This involved, for example, the areas: "Provision of day-to-day care focused on child's individual needs", "A family environment provides stimuli for child's healthy development", "A child spends the time more meaningfully", etc.

Keywords: *professional parents, staff of children's homes, benefits, questionnaire*

INTRODUCTION

A children's home is an environment created for the purposes of the enforcement of judicial decisions on institutional care and temporarily replaces a child's natural family environment or substitutional family environment. In the Slovak Republic, in accordance with the Act No. 305/2005 Coll. on social and legal protection of children and social care, institutional care can be provided also

in professional families which are preferred to providing institutional care in individual groups or in specialized individual groups. In professional families, child care is provided by a couple or an individual who are employees of a children's home [1].

In the professional literature, we can find multiple research studies that particularly in the past related to negative consequences of institutional care for children's development. The studies were mostly psychological and were a basis for the development of an institute of professional parenting in the system of substitutional care. In the Slovak Republic, professional substitutional care in families was enacted in 1993 and has been in practice since 1996. The intention was to provide such a type of substitute care which would combine the advantages of a family environment with the availability of professional assistance in child upbringing [2].

The institute of professional parenting is one of the forms that provides children with a family environment for at least a temporary period until a final or long-term solution is found in the form of family care – biological family or substitute family. Thus, children with ordered institutional care do not have to grow up in a collective facility; also, more intensive attention is paid to them, and their interests and needs are better saturated. Some children grow up in care of professional parents for years, even until their adulthood. Therefore, it is necessary to improve the quality of this form of care even further; a priority, related to its mission, is to use it as much as possible and eliminate a development of possible problems [3].

The basic characteristics of a professional family in Slovakia that result from the combination of multiple approaches towards the issue of professional parenting include:

- The aim of a professional family is not to create a long-term relationship with a child but his return to a biological family or his placement in a more binding form of substitutional care (foster care or adoption),
- A professional parent is an employee of a children's home and is in an equal relationship with other employees – employment relationship,
- A professional family may consist of a married couple or one parent,
- A child's legal status does not change when placed in a professional family – a child remains in institutional care, and
- A condition for carrying out this occupation is undertaking a training by professional parents and their partners [4].

A positive aspect of this form is that it is not legally binding, i.e. a parent and a child can freely decide if they want to stay in a relationship or not. A professional family provides a possibility of a more flexible transfer of a child from institutional care to a family environment. Despite that, for the whole period of existence of professional families the professionals have been facing the inconsistent opinions on and experiences with this form of care by the professional parents and professional community. Parents are positive about the fact that this form gives them enough possibilities and opportunities to

devote themselves to children. They consider these areas the most problematic: a constant dilemma – a parent or a professional, a phenomenon of a foreign child, a limited intimacy of a family (a direct access to a family environment by staff members of a children's home), new children, a contact with a biological family, different approaches by a children's home management, a child's contact with a children's home, and employment issues (leave, salary). The professional community positively evaluates thriving children in families. In most children during their stay in families, the measurable indicators, such as school results and social skills, improve [5].

The current statistical indicators by the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family suggest a constantly increasing trend in a number of children and young adults placed in professional families. In 2010, there were 986 children and young adults, in 2013 there were 1,394 children and young adults, and in 2016 there were 1,468 children and young adults placed in professional families [6].

The organization Lumos, which conducts surveys in the Czech Republic, states a significant decrease in institutional care in Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania in the past 10 years. Between 2002—2013, there was a decrease in a number of children up to 3 years of age in institutional care in Slovakia almost by 90 %. Such a dramatic decrease was possible particularly as a result of the development of the institute of foster care for a temporary period (a term for professional parenting used in the Czech Republic). Thus, Slovakia got to the level of other developed countries, such as Austria [7].

From the available surveys and statistics it is obvious that the number of children and young adults placed in professional families and the number of professional parents have been increasing in recent years. Professional parenting has its positives but also risks that have to be detected and addressed.

STUDY ON BENEFITS OF PROFESSIONAL PARENTING

The scientific project VEGA No. 1/0606/16 *Potential of securing and performance of professional parenting*, in which we studied benefits of professional parenting, focuses on closer identification of benefits and risks in multiple areas. The study objective was to find out and describe benefits of professional parenting from the perspective of professional parents and staff of children's homes. The objective was to find out if these groups differed in their perceptions of benefits related to professional parenting.

METHODS AND SAMPLE

To find out the perceived benefits of professional parenting, we used a self-designed questionnaire (the questionnaire was designed by the professionals in social work, psychology and methodology). The questionnaire consisted of 16 statements describing possible benefits of professional parenting that were rated on the Likert-type scale by the participants. To find out differences in the perceptions of the benefits between the groups of participants, we used the Mann-

Whitney U-test. The questionnaires were personally distributed to the children’s homes in the Slovak Republic.

There were 99 professional parents and 53 employees of children’s homes participating in the study.

RESULTS

The participants rated the statements in the questionnaire on the 5-point Likert-Type scale from 1 – Not beneficial at all to 5 – Totally beneficial. The data were analysed; the findings are shown below. Most professional parents (68.7 % – 100 %) rated all studied areas as beneficial. As the most beneficial, they rated the statements: “A family environment provides stimuli for children’s healthy development” – 100 % of the participants agreed with the statement (they rated it as 5 – Totally beneficial, 4 – Rather beneficial); “A higher quality of meeting the child’s needs” (97.9%); “Approaching a family environment” (97%); and “A tolerant and patient approach by a professional parent” (97%).

In case of the results of rating the statements by the staff of children’s homes, most of the staff members (62.3% – 98.1 %) rated all studied areas of benefits as beneficial except the statement “A high-quality and effective cooperation with a child’s biological family”. The staff of children’s homes (43.4%) had a neutral attitude towards this statement (they rated it as 3 – Neither beneficial, nor non-beneficial). As the most beneficial, they rated the statements: “A child has an opportunity to grow up in a natural family environment” – 98.1% of the participants agreed with the statement (they rated it as 5 – Totally beneficial, 4 – Rather beneficial); “A family environment provides stimuli for child’s healthy development” (96.2%); and “Children’s transition to adulthood is more natural” (88.7%).

We state the results of testing the differences in the perceptions of professional parenting between the staff of children’s homes and professional parents in the table below. The table contains the statements that showed the statistically significant differences.

Table 1: Differences between the staff of children’s homes and professional parents in their perceptions of benefits of professional parenting

Statement	Participant	n	Md	M _{rank}	U	sig	r _m
Provision of day-to-day care focused on child’s individual needs	Staff	53	5	69.15	2234.00	0.038	0.17
	Professional parent	99	5	80.43			
A family environment provides stimuli for child’s healthy development	Staff	53	5	70.05	2281.50	0.013	0.20
	Professional parent	99	5	79.95			

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A possibility to place a child in a professional family immediately	Staff	53	4	65.32	2031.00	0.008	0.21
	Professional parent	99	5	82.48			
A child spends the time more meaningfully	Staff	53	4	57.52	1617.50	< 0.001	0.37
	Professional parent	99	5	86.66			
A greater opportunity of self-realization of a child	Staff	53	5	64.25	1974.50	0.002	0.25
	Professional parent	99	5	83.06			
A higher quality of meeting the child's needs	Staff	53	5	62.96	1906.00	< 0.001	0.30
	Professional parent	99	5	83.75			
Children's transition to adulthood is more natural	Staff	53	4	63.38	1928.00	0.002	0.26
	Professional parent	99	5	83.53			
Approaching a family environment (a child learns how families function)	Staff	53	5	63.23	1920.00	< 0.001	0.33
	Professional parent	99	5	83.61			
Improvement of educational results	Staff	53	4	56.14	1544.50	< 0.001	0.38
	Professional parent	99	5	87.40			
Development of a closer emotional bond between a child and a professional parent	Staff	53	4	64.76	2001.50	0.007	0.22
	Professional parent	99	5	82.78			
A child becomes more independent	Staff	53	4	53.19	1388.00	< 0.001	0.43
	Professional parent	99	5	88.98			
A child learns how to handle money	Staff	53	4	52.20	1335.50	< 0.001	0.44
	Professional parent	99	5	89.51			
A tolerant and patient approach towards coping with difficult educational situations by a professional parent	Staff	53	4	57.32	1607.00	< 0.001	0.36
	Professional parent	99	5	86.77			

Legend: Md – Median, Mrank – Mean Rank, U – Mann-Whitney U-test, rm – Effect Size

Source: Own analysis

The results of testing the differences in the perceptions of the benefits of professional parenting between the staff of children's homes and the professional parents showed the statistically significant differences in perceptions of 13 out of 16 studied areas of the benefits ($p < 0.05$). All the studied areas in which the significant differences were found were perceived as more beneficial more by the professional parents.

DISCUSSION

There were multiple studies conducted on the positive effects of substitutional family care on development, education and social functioning of children removed from their biological families. The study by the professionals from Oxford shows that children who have been in foster care for a year or more get better grades at school than children who have been in institutional care or those living with their birth parents in families supported by children's services [8].

Placing children into foster care transforms their lives and brings multiple benefits for a child. It provides children with a stable and secure environment that is given by foster carers and that they may not have experienced before. Further benefits include an improvement of school performance and school skills, and experiencing a normal life in a family without socially pathological phenomena (abuse, neglect, a parent in prison). Furthermore, a positive aspect is maintaining the contacts with a child's biological family when contacts between a child and his original family are supported and controlled by foster carers [9].

Also in our study we wanted to find out the validity of these statements directly from the persons who are involved in provision and performance of professional parenting in the conditions of the Slovak Republic. Our results show that the professional parents rated all the studied areas of professional parenting as beneficial. Thus, the professional parents realized many benefits and positive effects of child care provided in professional families for children themselves. Probably, such perceptions relate not only to their knowledge about this institute but also to their experience with care for these children and their further psychological experiencing and social functioning.

Also, the results on the perceptions of the benefits of professional parenting in the staff of children's homes were similar; they rated 15 out of 16 studied areas as beneficial. The sample of the professional parents in comparison with the staff of children's homes rated the statement "A family environment provides stimuli for children's healthy development" as one of the most beneficial ones (professional parents – 100 % and staff of children's homes – 96.2 %).

Despite that, the statistically significant differences occurred in the results of testing the differences in the perceptions of the benefits of professional parenting between the staff of children's homes and the professional parents. From the perspective of an effect size, however, only minor or moderate differences were identified. The differences were present in 13 out of 16 studied areas. The statistically significant differences in the perceptions of the benefits of professional parenting between the staff of children's homes and the professional parents were not found only in the statements: "A child has an opportunity to grow up in a natural family environment", "An opportunity to place a group of siblings in one professional family", and "A high-quality and effective cooperation with a child's biological family".

The findings confirm multiple real benefits of professional parenting in the conditions of the Slovak Republic.

CONCLUSION

In the paper we stated the results of the study focused on the identification of the benefits of child care in professional families in the Slovak Republic. The objective was to find out and describe the benefits of professional parenting from the viewpoint of professional parents and staff of children's homes. Also, the aim was to find out if these groups of people involved in the system of professional parenting would differ in perceptions of the benefits brought by professional parenting. The definitions of the individual benefits in the form of statements stated in the questionnaire were based on the knowledge and studies of several professionals in the area of substitutional child care. The study results show that most professional parents rated all the studied areas as beneficial. Similarly, the staff of children's homes rated all areas, except one, as totally beneficial or beneficial. The results brought also the statistically significant differences in the perceptions of the benefits of professional parenting between the staff of children's homes and the professional parents in most studied areas.

The study has brought really reliable and valid data, because we were finding the opinions on professional parenting directly from the professional parents who perform this activity and also from the staff of children's homes who cover this institute and make a common multidisciplinary team of care for children removed from their biological families. The aim of such care is, first of all, to defend the interests and benefits of children, which relates to the stated benefits of the occupation itself. Our study can be used in an enhancement of the quality of conducting and providing professional parenting in the Slovak Republic.

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