

COOPERATION OF PROFESSIONAL FOSTER PARENTS WITH THE CHILD'S BIOLOGICAL FAMILY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we present partial results of the research entitled “The use of selected elements of the systems approach in the context of professional families”. The aim of our project was to analyse the functioning of selected elements of the family system of professional foster families from the perspective of professional foster parents, their life partners, their biological children and children placed in professional foster families. We compiled a questionnaire, the results of which were processed by quantitative analysis. The online questionnaire was designed for professional foster parents, their life partners, their biological children and children placed in professional foster families. The questionnaire referred to children aged 12 years and older.

We present the results of research on the cooperation between professional foster parents and biological parents of children placed in professional foster families. In our research, we were interested in whether professional foster parents communicate with biological parents about their children, how often they cooperate with them, whether they involve the child's extended biological family in the cooperation, and whether professional foster parents cooperate with their life partners and biological children when solving the child's problems. The online questionnaire was designed for professional foster parents, their life partners, their biological children and children placed in professional foster families. The questionnaire referred to children aged 12 years and older. The results of the research present the current state of the art and may provide an impetus for changes in supporting the relationships of children in professional foster families with their biological parents.

Keywords: *professional foster family, child, biological family*

INTRODUCTION

In the Slovak Republic, professional foster care is a form of institutional care, which is carried out by professional foster parents “in the home environment of the professional foster parent in a family house or in an apartment provided by the Centre for Children and Families (hereinafter referred to as “the Centre”) or in a family house or in an apartment of which the professional foster parent is the owner, co-owner, tenant or joint tenant, which the professional foster parent has the right to use on the basis of a loan agreement or to which the professional foster

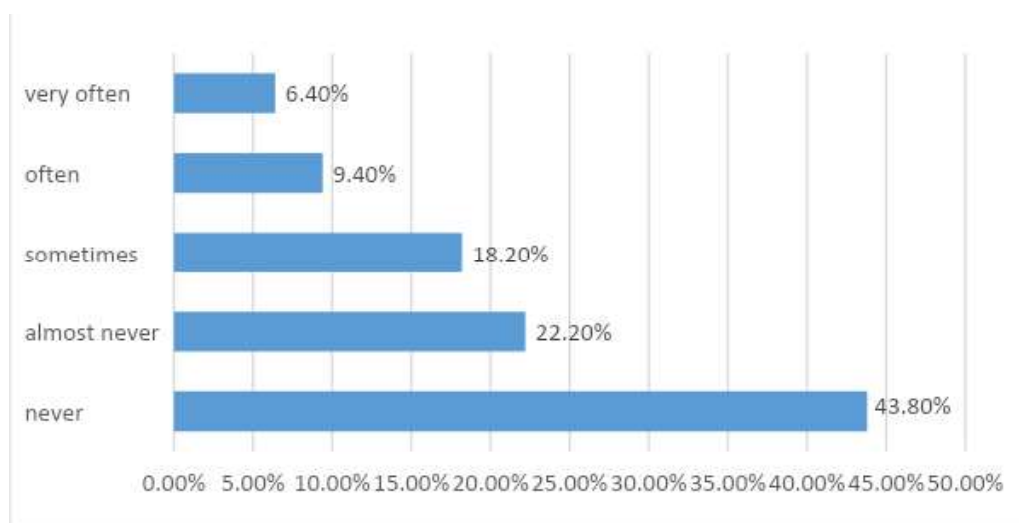
parent has the right of personal use.” [1] (Act No. 376/2022 Coll., Art. 1, § 2a) According to §52 of Act No. 305/2005 Coll., the professional foster parent is “obliged to promote contact between the child's parent, the person who is personally taking care of the child, another person close to the child or the applicant for foster family care and the child placed in the professional foster family and, in cooperation with other professional employees of the Centre, to prepare the child for establishing a personal relationship between the child placed in the professional foster family and the applicant for foster family care.” [2] In our research, we were interested in the experience of professional foster parents from the Centres for Children and Families in the Slovak Republic in working with biological families of children.

RESULTS

The research sample consisted of 203 respondents working as professional foster parents. The mean age of respondents was 48.43 years (SD=9.02), they had an average of 2 biological children (SD=1.38), and by the time of the research they had practised professional foster parenting for an average of 7.47 years (SD=5.31), they had had an average of approximately 7 children placed (SD=6.76).

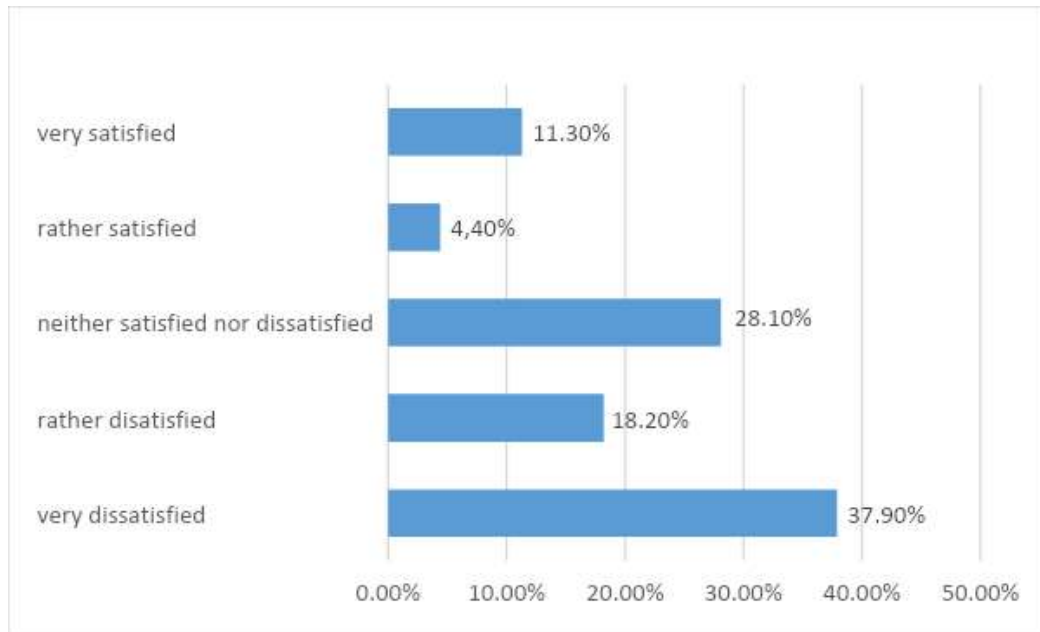
They were mostly women (n=183, 90.1%), with a secondary school diploma (called “maturita” in the Slovak Republic) (n=147, 72.4%), living with their life partner/spouse (n=155; 76.4%) in a rural area (n=139, 68.5%), while their life partner/spouse did not usually carry out professional foster parenting with them (83.7%).

Fig. 1. *How often do you communicate with the biological parents of children placed in the professional foster family?*



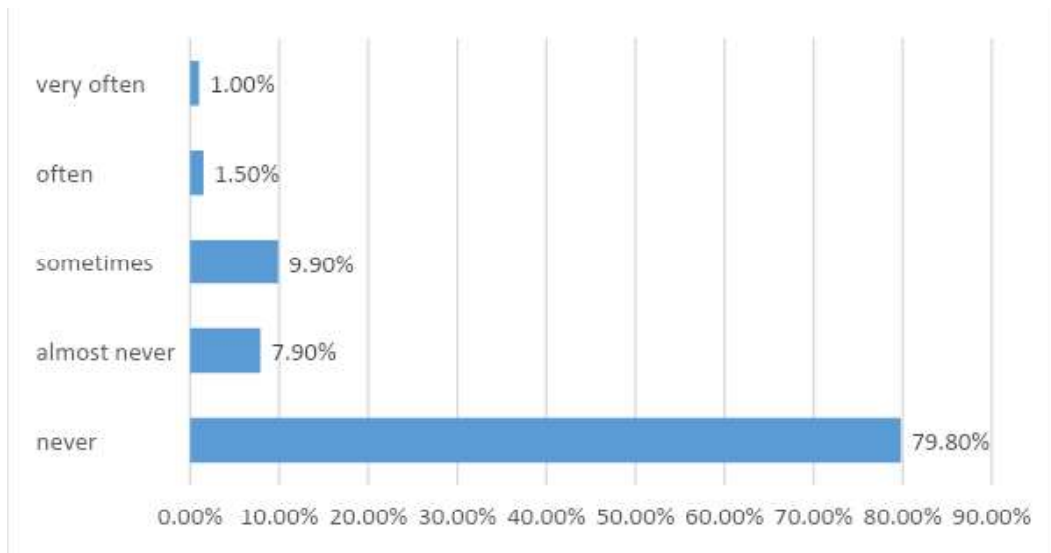
When asked how often professional foster parents communicate with the children's biological parents, 66% of respondents answered never or almost never and only 15.8% answered often or very often.

Fig. 2. *How satisfied are you with the communication with the biological parents of children placed in the professional foster family?*



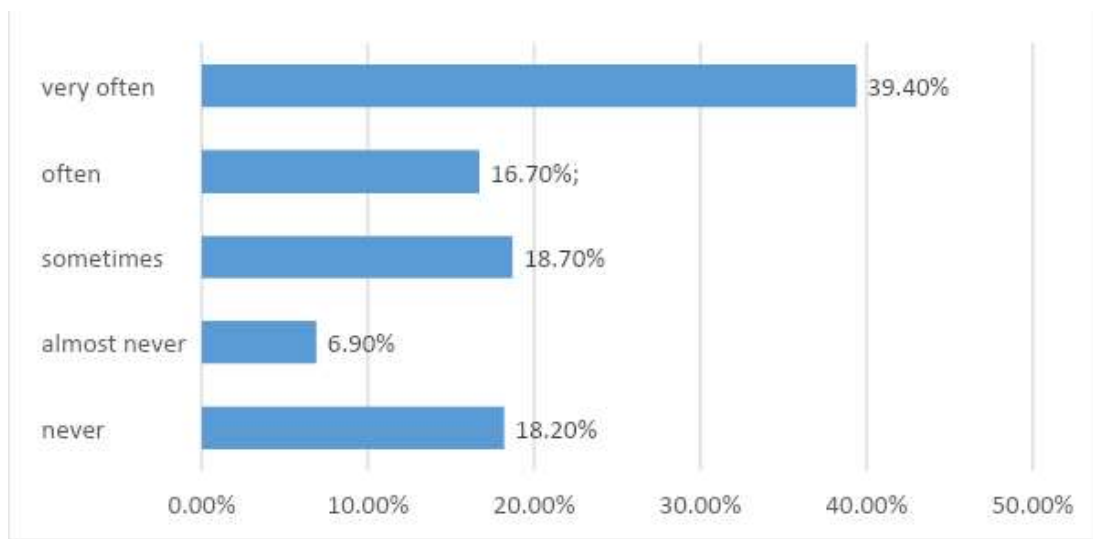
The results showed that 56.1% of the professional foster parents in the sample were not satisfied with the communication with the biological parents of the children placed in the PFF (rather dissatisfied and dissatisfied). 15% percent of respondents indicated that they were satisfied or rather satisfied and 28.1% gave a neutral response, i.e., neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Fig. 3. *When trying to solve the child's problems, you cooperate with: the biological parents*



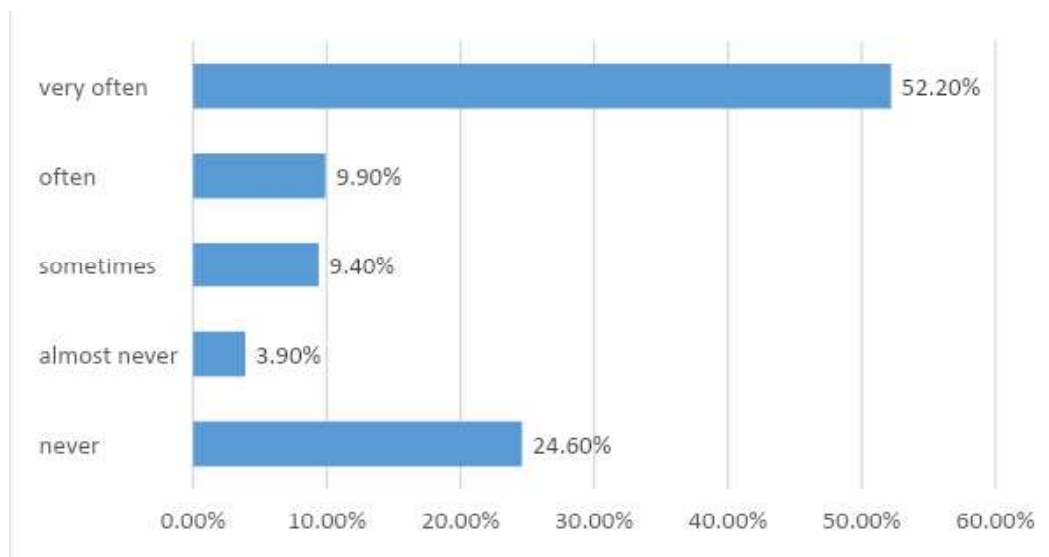
87.7% of the professional foster parents in our sample reported that they never or almost never cooperated with the biological parents in solving the problems of the child placed in the PFF, and only 2.5% of the respondents cooperated with the parents very often or often. 9.9% of respondents gave the answer sometimes.

Fig. 4. *When trying to solve the child's problems, you cooperate with: the whole family*



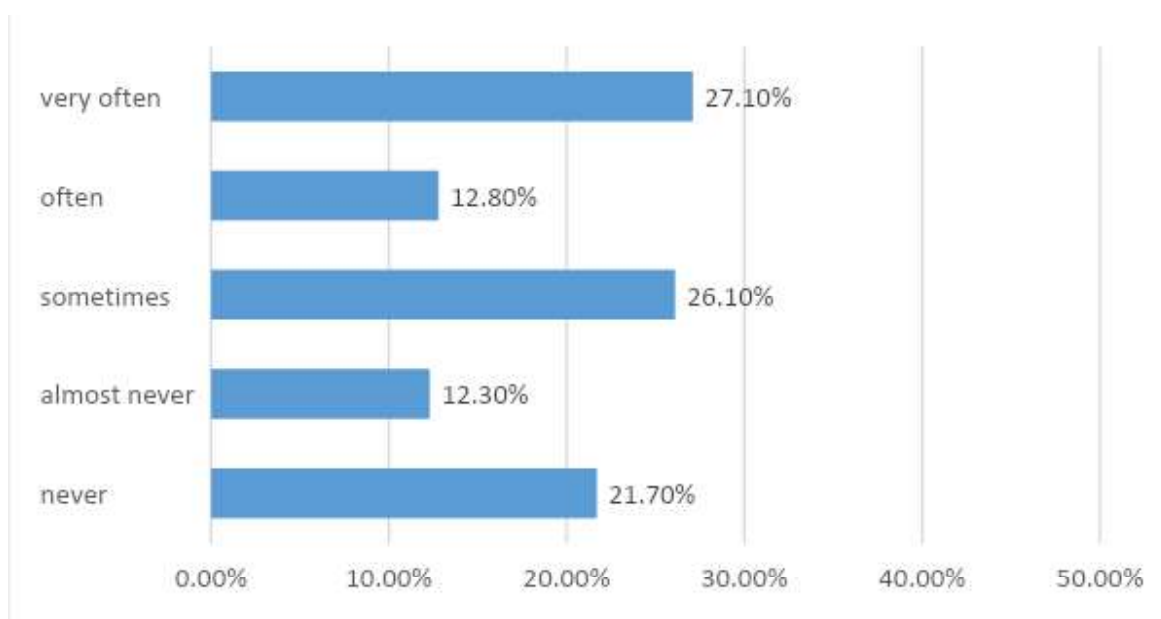
The results showed that the majority - 56.1% of the professional foster parents in our research sample work with the whole family very often or often when solving problems with a child placed in the PFF, 18.7% gave the answer sometimes, and 25.1% almost never or never involve the whole family in solving problems.

Fig. 5. *When trying to solve the child's problems, you cooperate with: the life partner*



The majority - 62.1% of professional foster parents cooperate with their life partners very often or often, 9.4% sometimes and 28.5% never or almost never involve their life partners in solving problems with the child placed in the PFF.

Fig. 6. *When trying to solve the child's problems, you cooperate with: biological children*



The majority of professional foster parents - 60.1% never, almost never or only sometimes involve their biological children in solving problems of children placed in the PFF and 39.9% involve their children in solving problems very often or often.

DISCUSSION

The results of the research showed that 66% of the respondents - professional parents - never or almost never communicated with the child's biological parents. More support for professional foster parents in communicating with biological parents from the Centres for Children and Families could help to change this situation. The initial disinterest of the biological parents in communicating with the professional foster parents could be overcome by supported interest of the professional foster parents in the biological parents, a non-judgmental approach and an effort not to cut off the child's contact with his/her biological family. The main reasons why it is important to support children's contact with their biological parents include improving the relational bond with their parents, understanding the reasons for their removal from the family (appropriate to the child's age and intellectual maturity), and treating the losses experienced by the children in their families. The issue of relational bond is discussed in detail by Hašto (p. 90), who states that “a prerequisite for healthy child development is a “secure bond” in which the child knows that in stressful and anxiety-provoking situations he or she can rely on the parent's emotional and active support and reassurance.” [3] “The relational bond is most telling of the interaction between mother and child in early life. The relational bond is a strong bond that is formed between the mother (the caregiver) and the baby right after birth. We are not born with a relational bond; it needs to be developed over time through a loving and caring relationship. In the typical case, the caregiver is the mother; thus the mother becomes the relational

person to whom the relational bond is directed. The child reacts positively to the mother, feels comfortable and safe in her presence. The relational bond therefore provides not only love, but also security, safety and support, especially in situations that cause the child stress, fear and tension. Thus, the mother is considered a security base for the child. The lack of interaction between mother and child has pathological consequences on the child's development, which are especially dangerous if this lack of interaction between them is deep and long. The relational bond theory of the child's attachment to the mother assumes that this relationship forms the basic pillar for all subsequent social relationships. Breaking an already established bond causes anxiety in a child at an early age and, in certain circumstances, can have serious consequences for his or her future development. [4]

Other research results showed that 56.1% of the professional foster parents in the sample were not satisfied with the communication with the biological parents of children placed in a professional foster family (rather dissatisfied and dissatisfied). 87.7% of the professional foster parents in our sample reported that they never or almost never cooperate with the biological parents in resolving the problems of a child placed with a professional foster family.

However, the results showed that the majority 56.1% of the professional foster parents in our research sample work with the child's entire family very often or often when solving problems with a child placed in the professional foster family, 18.7% gave the answer sometimes, and 25.1% almost never or never involve the entire family in solving problems. The so-called family circle meetings can be used to support children's contact with their biological family. It is a meeting of members of the biological family, both near and distant, during which they themselves can suggest a way of dealing with a serious life situation. "The family circle meetings are organised in Slovakia by the Society of Friends of Children from Children's Homes Úsmev ako dar, an important non-governmental organisation working with dysfunctional families and children in foster care. The family circle meeting takes place in the presence of a coordinator who guides the family, allows the members to connect and cooperate in order to create a suitable environment for the child, motivates the family to cooperate and cohere in order to find ways and possibilities to eliminate the problem. One of the most important signs is taking responsibility for the future direction of the family, planning steps and implementing them. The advantages of the family circle meeting include the presence of the child, who actively participates in the planning and implementation of steps towards family rehabilitation. [5] Every man has a need to belong somewhere and this is what drives the implementation of the family circle meeting. [6] A family circle meeting lasts approximately two to three hours. The length of the meeting depends on the topic and the problem being addressed. Every family circle meeting is preceded by preparation. This includes the coordinator's communication with the relatives and with professionals with whom he or she attends meetings to prepare for the family meeting." [7]

The results of the research reflect the use of the professional foster parents' own family support in solving problems with a child placed in the professional foster family. 62.1% of respondents (professional foster parents) work with their life partner very often or often when solving problems with a child placed in the professional foster family, and 39.9% involve their children very often or often. We consider these results to be very positive, as seeking support in one's own family is also a sign of well-functioning relationships and a vital need to seek support and encouragement within the family circle. [8]

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of our research, we conclude that there is a need to support professional foster parents in promoting children's contact with their biological parents. It is necessary to expand the counselling and professional service in ensuring contact between children and their families, to intensify direct work with the biological parents of children by social workers and psychologists from Centres for Children and Families. Support for children's relationships with their parents is necessary in terms of psychological treatment of the children's losses, supporting parents to adjust their relationships with their children and creating a chance for the biological parents to change their life situation. It is important to note that professional foster parenting is intended to be a temporary form of care until the biological parents are able to care for their children again. In cases where it will not be possible to return the child to his/her biological family, the professional foster family should provide the child with a sense of acceptance and security. It is a fact that the majority of children placed in professional foster families go into foster care (most often adoption and foster care). In all cases, however, it is necessary to help the child to nurture the relationship with the biological parents, and this can be significantly helped by the cooperation of professional foster parents with the children's biological parents.

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