

# COOPERATION OF PROFESSIONAL FOSTER PARENTS IN SOLVING THE CHILD'S PROBLEMS WITH PROFESSIONAL WORKERS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on professional foster parents who provide care for children removed from their family environment by court order. The practice of professional foster care entails a number of challenging situations that professional foster parents are often unable to cope with on their own. To support professional foster parents in managing such situations, a team of professional workers has been set up. The aim of the research was to find out whether professional foster parents cooperate with professional workers in solving the problems of a child placed in the professional foster family and also how they perceive the usefulness of a social worker. The research sample consisted of 203 respondents practising professional foster parenting, which represents almost one third of all professional parents in the Slovak Republic. The results showed that professional foster parents most often cooperate with social workers and a psychologists in solving the child's problems, and less often with other professional workers. Respondents also identified areas in which they found social workers useful.

**Keywords:** *professional workers, professional foster parents, social worker*

## INTRODUCTION

The professional foster family is an organisational part of the Centres for Children and Families. In a professional foster family, the care of the children is provided by spouses employed by the Centre for Children and Families or by an individual employed by the Centre for Children and Families [1]. The goal of professional foster parenting is not to establish a long-term relationship with the child, but to return the child to his or her biological family or to place the child in foster care, such as foster care and adoption [2]. Several studies conducted in the Slovak Republic have confirmed the importance of professional foster care and its significance for the healthy development of the child placed in the professional foster family [3]. Children placed in professional foster families have often experienced maltreatment, substance abuse by parents and poverty in their biological families [4]. Research shows that children in foster care have two to three times higher rates of developmental, emotional, and behavioural problems than other children [5]. An important role for professional foster parents is played

by the professional team of workers of the Centres for Children and Families, which is usually made up of social workers, psychologists and special pedagogues. Their role is to provide help and support to professional foster families.

Our aim was to find out whether professional foster parents cooperate with professional workers in solving the problems of the child placed in the professional foster family and also how they perceive the usefulness of a social worker.

## **METHODS**

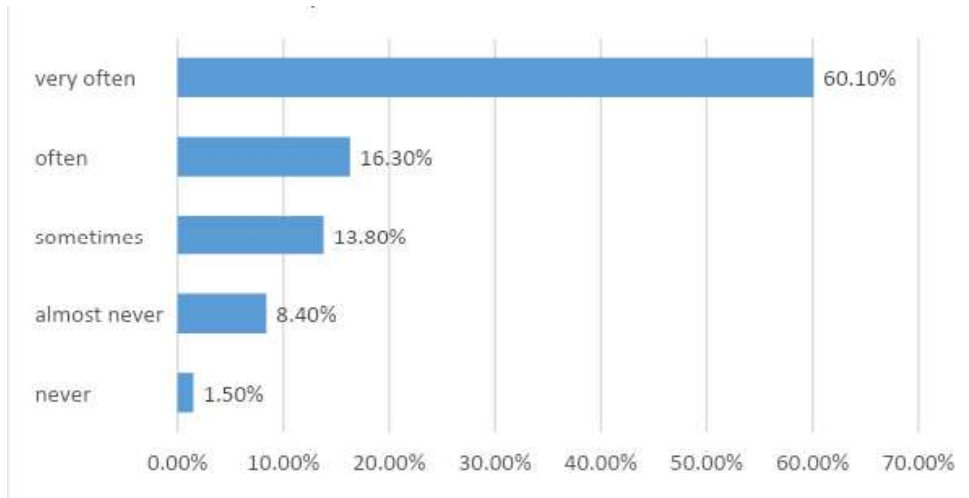
The research sample consisted of 203 professional foster parents. The mean age of respondents was 48.43 years (SD=9.02), they had an average of 2 biological children (SD=1.38), and by the time of the research they had practised professional foster parenting for an average of 7.47 years (SD=5.31) and 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 the professional foster parenting with them (83.7%).

To identify cooperation between professional foster parents and professional workers, we used a self-elaborated questionnaire. In addition to sociodemographic variables, the questionnaire included items that focused on the frequency of cooperation with professional workers and one open-ended question that explored how professional foster parents perceived the usefulness of a social worker in their cooperation.

The SPSS 21 software was used for statistical data processing. In the statistical analysis, we used the description of sociodemographic variables through basic measures: arithmetic mean, median, mode, standard deviation, minimum, maximum and relative frequencies (percentages). Content analysis of the data was used for the last open-ended question.

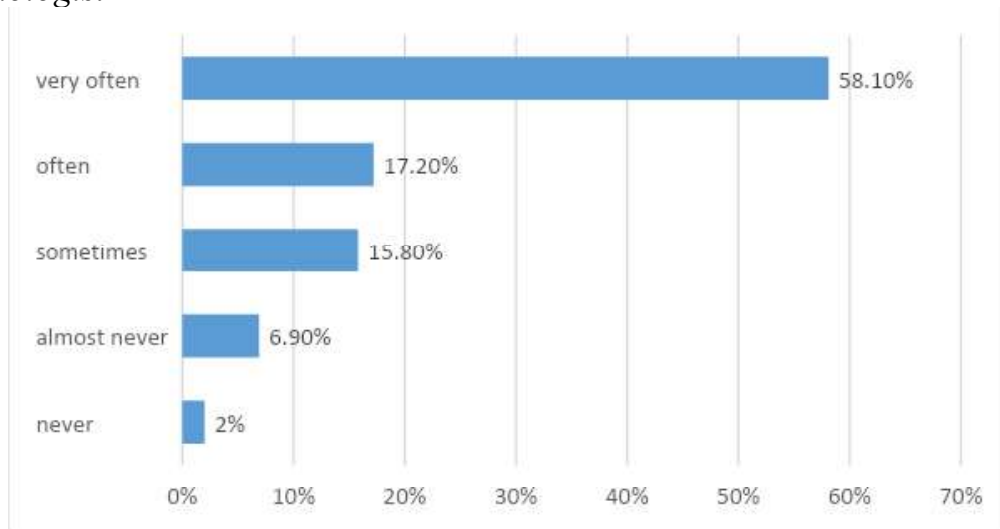
## RESULTS

**Fig. 1.** *When trying to solve the child's problems, you cooperate with: a social worker*



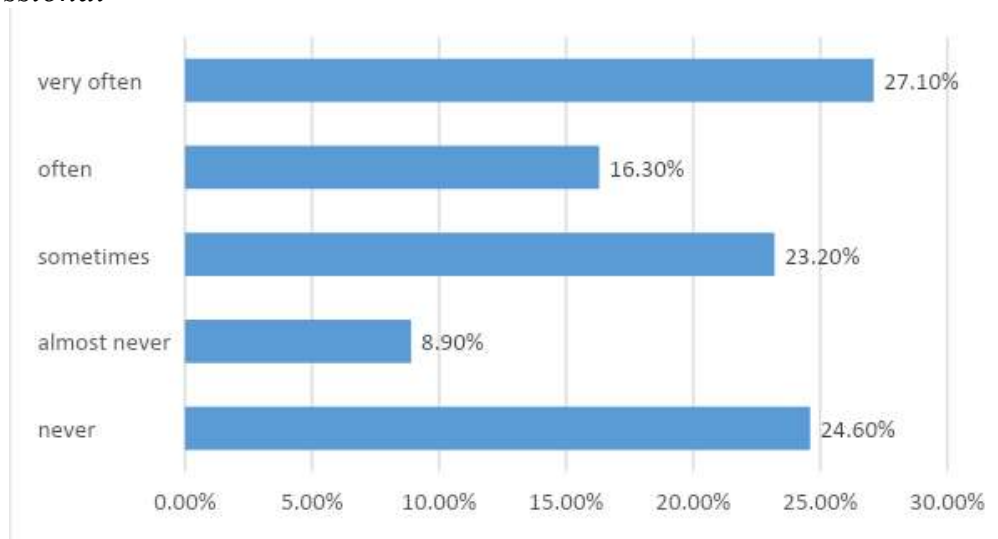
Up to 76.4% of respondents stated that they cooperate with a social worker when trying to solve problems of a child placed in the professional foster family, 13.8% stated occasional cooperation and 9.9% of respondents never or almost never cooperate with a social worker.

**Fig. 2.** *When trying to solve the child's problems, you cooperate with: a psychologist*



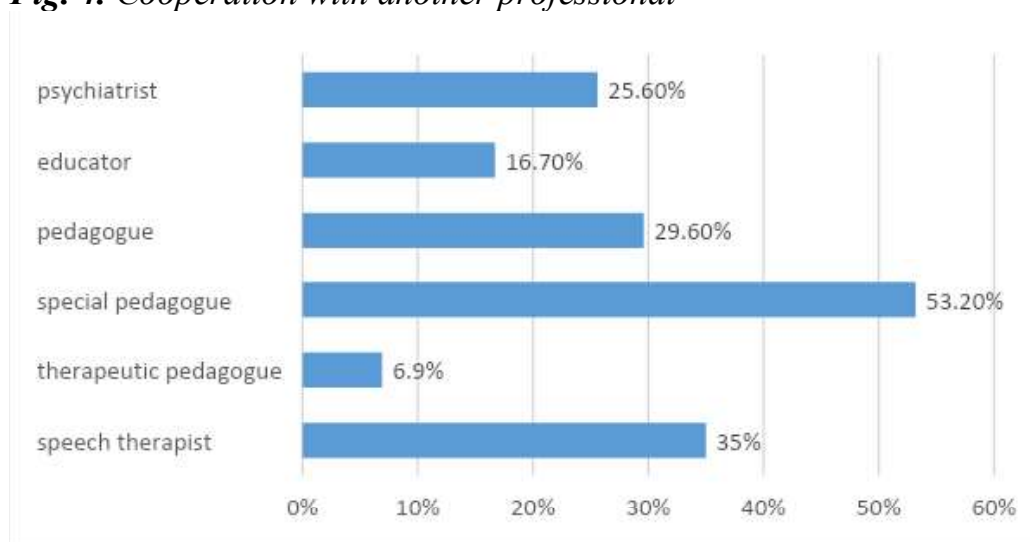
75.3% of respondents reported that they cooperate with a psychologist very often or often when solving problems of a child placed in the professional foster family, 15.8% reported occasional cooperation, and 8.9% of professional foster parents never or almost never cooperate with a psychologist.

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



The results showed that 43.4% of professional foster parents cooperated with another professional very often or often, 23.2% reported occasional cooperation, and 33.5% almost never or never cooperated with another professional.

**Fig. 4.** *Cooperation with another professional*



A closer look at cooperation with another professional showed that the most common professionals were a special pedagogue (53.2%), a speech therapist (35%), an pedagogue (29.6%), and a psychiatrist (25.6%). Cooperation with an educator (16.7%) and a therapeutic pedagogue (6.9%) was less frequently sought.

**Table 1.** *The usefulness of a social worker in cooperation from the perspective of professional foster parents*

CATEGORY	NUMBER	%
Provides assistance in solving problems, difficulties	45	17%
Provides organisational assistance	40	15%
Provides advice	38	14%
Provides information	36	13%
Ensures contact with the biological family of the child placed in the professional foster family	29	11%
Provides emotional help and support	29	11%
Can help with anything and is always available	16	6%
Provides assistance with paperwork, administrative assistance	10	4%
Is useful because of experience	7	2.6%
Provides assistance in dealing with all situations regarding children	6	2%
Handles the necessary things	5	2%
I don't know	4	1%
Is not useful	3	1%
Updates family circumstances	1	0.4%
	269	

Professional foster parents answered the question: “In your opinion, what makes a social worker useful in working with your professional foster family?” The responses of professional foster parents were categorized. A total of 45 professional foster parents (17%) reported that the usefulness of a social worker lies in providing assistance in solving problems and difficulties. The second most frequent answer given by professional foster parents was providing organisational support (n=40, 15%). This was followed by the answers that a social worker provides counselling (n=38, 14%), provides information (n=36, 13%), provides contact with the biological family of the child placed in the professional foster family (n=29, 11%), provides emotional help and support (n=29, 11%), helps with anything and is always available (n=16, 6%), provides help with paperwork, assistance with administration (n=10, 4%), is helpful because of experience (n=7, 2.6%), provides help with all situations regarding children (n=6, 2%), and handles necessary things (n=5, 2%). The answer “I don't know” was given by 4 professional foster parents (1%) and the answer “Is not helpful” was given by 3 professional foster parents (1%). The answer “Updates family circumstances” was given by 1 professional foster parent (0.4%).

## DISCUSSION

The results of the research show that more than three quarters of professional foster parents cooperate with a social worker as well as with a psychologist in solving problems with the child. We see this finding as positive, as social workers

and psychologists form a professional team dedicated to professional foster families in the Centres for Children and Families. The provision of social, psychological and employment counselling is a normal part of the organisational provision of professional parenting. The results of the research conducted in 2017 also show that professional parents are in regular contact with the professional staff of the Centres for Children and Families, who communicate not only with the professional foster parents, but also with the children in their care [6].

Despite the high number of cooperating professional foster parents reported above, almost 10% of professional foster parents said that they almost never or never cooperate with social workers and psychologists. This may be related to the fact that some professional foster families prefer to rely on their own strengths to solve problems, feeling that they can handle the situation on their own, which can be risky in certain circumstances.

Regarding cooperation with other professionals, almost half of the professional foster parents cooperate with other professionals as well, mostly with special pedagogues, speech therapists, pedagogues and psychiatrists. These results only confirm that children placed in professional foster families often suffer from various difficulties that stem from the natural family environment. The disturbance or trauma in the child receiving care is sometimes severe and requires visits to a child psychiatrist [7]. Hyperactivity, learning difficulties and violent behaviour can lead to increased tension in professional foster families [8]. Such behaviour can even lead to termination of foster care [9]. For this reason, we see it as positive that professional foster parents cooperate to a large extent with other professionals who can help them in coping with the often-difficult situations of raising and caring for children in professional foster families.

Regarding the usefulness of social workers, professional foster parents most frequently stated that they help with difficulties, provide organisational support and social counselling. Professional foster parents are provided with social counselling in the form of basic and specialised social counselling [10]. Within the framework of social counselling, professional foster parents are provided with services in solving the problems of the entrusted children, visits in the environment of professional foster families, interviews and contact with members of the professional foster family take place. Professional parents are advised by social workers on how they should proceed in dealing with problems [11].

Another identified area in which professional foster parents find the social worker useful is providing contact with the biological family of a child placed in the professional foster family. The social worker plays the role of coordinator in the restoration and formation of the relationship between the biological parent and the child in the professional foster family; he also arranges dates and places of meetings [12]. Children placed in professional foster families do not lose contact with their biological family, they meet regularly, sometimes the children stay in the biological family for a longer period of time [13]. The provision of emotional

support by the social worker is another factor identified. It is important for professional foster parents to be able to talk about their difficulties with a social worker, to have someone who will listen to them, understand and support them and who shows interest.

In future research, it would be interesting to find out how professional workers evaluate cooperation with professional foster families.

## CONCLUSION

The results of our research show that the vast majority of professional foster parents often cooperate with social workers and psychologists in solving the child's problems, which can be seen as a positive phenomenon. Our research also confirmed that professional foster parents cooperate mostly with special pedagogues, speech therapists, pedagogues and psychiatrists. This is due to the fact that children placed in professional foster families often suffer from behavioural disorders, attention disorders and psychological problems stemming from the original family environment in which they were neglected by their parents. The results of the research showed that professional foster parents perceived the usefulness of social workers in many areas, especially in the areas of assistance and counselling, providing contact with the biological family and emotional support. Our research has yielded interesting results that can be further processed in future research. It is desirable that attention continues to be paid to the issue of cooperation between professional foster parents and professional workers.

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