Prospect of Foster Family by Foster Children With Disabilities

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This article deals with child-parent relationships in foster families, who bring up foster children with disabilities. The research was conducted in Republic of Adygheya (the Russian Federation). We have found out that, according to a child's view, interfamily relationships can be very ambivalent. On the one hand, foster children say that they have positive relationships with foster parents and describe their foster family as friendly, affectionate and thoughtful; on the other hand, they experience many difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships, they can't collaborate and have a high level of anxiety and hostility towards others. They view interfamily relationships as complicated, conflict, emotionally cold.

Keywords: foster children, foster family, foster parents, parent-child relationship, perception, representation, disabilities

INTRODUCTION

Each child has an absolute right to live and be brought up in a family. During recent years, our government has paid significant attention to the problems of children, including orphans. Thus, on 1.06.2012 the national strategy of actions in the interests of children during 2012-2017, which is designed to form state policy to improve their situation in the country, was approved by a decree of the President of Russian Federation ("Decree of the President of Russian Federation"). One of the directions of this national strategy is a thorough support and development of family forms of life for children without parental care.

Development of the institute of foster family brings to a significant increase of number of citizens who take children into their families from orphanages. The data of the official statistics proves it: while in 2010 there were 140.3 thousand children in the data-bank of children without parental care, in 2015 this number was 87.3 thousand children. It affirms that there is a significant decrease in amount of orphans, mostly due to an increase of a number of foster families ("Adoption in Russia").

Republic of Adygheya is not an exception. According to the data of the federal statistic monitoring, the amount of children in foster families of Adygheya was 300 in 2011, in 2012 – 308 children, in 2013 – 372 children ("Placement of orphans into

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foster families is in priority"). The number of foster families in the republic increased from 114 in 2011 to 150 in 2014. In 2015 a number of citizens who wanted to adopt an orphan or provide parental charge, doubled. Today, out of 1,299 orphans and children without parental charge 1,209 children are either under guardianship or in foster families, 90 children are still in orphanages ("There has been an increase in the number of families which want to foster orphans in Adygheya").

Taking into account everything mentioned above, the problem of child-parent relationships in a foster family acquires a special actuality. This article has a special focus on the attitude to the world of a foster child with disabilities when he/she finds himself/herself in a new social environment.

Systematic and transgenerational approaches became theoretical and methodological basis in studying family (Minuchin et al., 1967; Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin and Fishman, 1981; Minuchin et al., 1990; Satir, 1999; Varga, 2001; Eidemiller, Yustitskis, 2002; Kholmogorova, 2002, and others); idea of structure and functions of child-parent relationships as the main factor of a child's socialisation during all stages of life-span development (Spivakovskaya, 1991, 1999; Eidemiller, Yustitskis, 2002; Markovskaya, 2000; Ovcharova, 2003; and others); peculiarities of orphans and children without parental care, which reveal specific features that make foster children different from biological ones, and which can significantly complicate interrelations in a foster family (Mukhina, 1989; Dubrovina et al., 1990; Prikhozhan and Tolstykh, 2007; Shipitsina, 2005; and others).

Each year there are more and more researches devoted not only to general questions of functioning of a foster family, but also to a problem of foster child's development inside it. Thus, the following authors describe peculiarities of orphans' adaptation in foster families: Grebennikova and Firsova, 2009; Pryadko and Berezhnaya, 2011, and others; while system of relationships between foster children and foster parents are under research by Ivanova, 2007; Yaparova, 2010; Oslon, 2012, and others. Relationships between siblings in a foster family are studied by Oriana Linares, 2006; Stevenson Wojciak et al., 2013; McBeath et al., 2014, and others. Health state and problems of development of foster children in a foster family are characterised in works of Postavnev and Postavneva, 2012; Serova, 2012; Kocherova et al., 2013; Larin and Konopleva, 2013; Zakirov, 2014; Remizova, 2014, and others. The problems of family placement of orphans are described by Litvak, 2009; Lyubimtseva, 2010; Semenova et al., 2012, while peculiarities of development of orphans with disabilities are described by Brown and Rodger, 2009; Denby et al., 2011; Agarkov et al., 2012; Ubozhenko, 2013; Aleksandrova and Vatoropina, 2014. Besides, peculiarities of children who are brought up in depriving conditions are described in works of Langmeier and Matejcek, 1984; Lisina, 1986; Shipitsina et al., 2005; et al.

METHODS

Description of the research samples

The experimental research was conducted on the samples of foster families of Republic of Adygheya in the Foster Family Supervising Service of State Educational Establishment of Republic of Adygheya for children who need psychological-pedagogical and medical-social help, "Diagnostic and Consulting Centre" and secondary schools of the republic.

The experimental group of the research consisted of 60 foster children with disabilities aged from 6 to 17, who are brought up in 51 foster families. The children are characterised with various psychological or physical disabilities (mental retardation, psychological retardation, impaired vision, blood system disease,

respiratory disease, digestion disease, etc.). All the children have spent more than 3 years in their families.

Control group consisted of 50 biological children with disabilities aged from 6 to 17, who are brought up in 50 biological families.

Thus, the general sample of the research consisted of 110 children with disabilities, who are brought up in 101 families.

The families volunteered in the research. The amount of respondents was constant throughout the whole experiment.

Methods of the research

We used the following methods of research: 1) questionnaire "Parent-child interaction" (for children over 11 years old) (Markovskaya, 2000); 2) "Colour test of relationships" (Etkind, 2000); 3) "Kinetic portrait of the family" (Berns and Kaufman, 2003; Liders, 2008); 4) "Film-Test" by R. Gille (Kudryashov, 1992; Osnitskii, 1997); 5) original interview of foster children to study their attitude to life in a foster family.

The results went through qualitative and quantitative analyses with the help of the methods of mathematical statistics (the rating procedure of the selected data, calculation of the average value, standard deflection, and Student's t-criterion).

Stages of the research

The research was conducted since 2011 to 2015 in a number of stages. During the first stage we made a sample of participants, consisting of foster children, received foster parents' agreements for their foster children's participation in the research and analysed the data of the monitoring of the effectiveness of family forms of upbringing in Republic of Adygheya. During the second stage we conducted an experimental work with the foster children, in the course of which they answered the questions in the questionnaires and took tests with the help of the above mentioned techniques. During the third stage of the research we analysed and gave interpretation of the received data, and made the corresponding conclusions. All the data were processed qualitatively and quantitatively

RESULTS

Perception of relationships with foster parents by foster children

The results of parental survey conducted with the help of the questionnaire "Parent-Child Interaction" (Markovskaya, 2000) are presented according to the revealed established discrepancies of samples.

Foster children, compared to biological children, more often evaluate their parents as demanding and totally controlling (t=2.55; p=0.0132), at the same time, parents seldom acknowledge this fact (43% of respondents).

The data of the scale "Emotional distance – intimacy of a child to a parent" depict a parent's idea of his/her emotional intimacy with a child (Markovskaya, 2000). The majority of foster children with disabilities view their relationship with parents as intimate, and they expect the same attitude towards them.

The analysis of established discrepancies of the scale "Rejection - acceptance of a child" has shown that though many foster parents declare rather high level of acceptance of their foster children (59%), especially young children (72%), foster children themselves less often view their parents' behaviour as accepting (63%). Biological children also less often characterise their parents' behaviour as accepting one (77%), as opposed to parents (86%). At the same time, many foster children

with disabilities evaluate their foster parents' behaviour as rejecting (22% of foster children) compared to parents' own evaluation (17% of foster parents).

The established discrepancies of the scale "Agreement – disagreement between a child and his/her parents" prove that there is a lack of agreement, frequent disagreements and difficulties to come to an understanding between foster parents and foster teenagers with disabilities (53%). Biological families more often demonstrate a high level of agreement between parents and a teenager (t= -2.52; p=0.0144).

The survey of foster children with disabilities with the help of the technique "Colour test of relationships" has shown the following.

Many foster children perceive the established relationships with foster parents as positive (68%), placing the parents on the same level with themselves or even higher. At the same time, a considerable percentage of children (32%) have certain difficulties in relationships with foster parents. The most rejected parent is a foster father (20% of children indicated that).Thus, we can say that the most difficult establishment of relationships is between male foster parents and their foster children.

Diagnostically important is not only the position of the choice of the colour, which denotes either of the parents, but the colour itself which is associated with a parent. The analysis of colour samples of foster children has shown that the most frequently chosen colours attributed to a foster mother were red, violet or yellow; as for foster fathers – either green or grey.

According to the interpretation of colour meanings, foster mother in children's view is energetic and active, while foster father is seen as dominant, tough and detached which makes interaction with him complicated. (Sobchik, 1998; Breslav, 2000; Etkind, 2000). Apparently, such views are connected not so much with real harshness and detachment of male foster parents, but either with stereotypical ideas of family members, acquired in orphanages, or with negative experience of interaction with father in biological families.

Our findings correspond with other similar researches (Lupekina, 2006). Thus, E.A. Lupekina (2006) points out that relationships with foster mothers are full of positive emotions, while foster fathers cause very controversial feelings and insufficient satisfaction from interaction with them.

The most frequent self-samplings among foster children are blue and brown, which denote a demand in strong attachment and emotional comfort, modesty, lack of claims, weakness, dependence, a tendency to decrease the level of anxiety, etc. (Sobchik, 1998, Etkind, 2000).

Besides, children have equally demonstrated two orientations: "I am good, they are bad" and "I am bad, they are good", which they demonstrate in their attitude towards foster parents. At the same time, the majority of children have dissociated and detached relationships with their foster parents.

Another parameter under analysis is a child's identification with significant people. Thus, the majority of foster children absolutely don't identify themselves with their foster parents (only 13% of children identify themselves with their foster mother and only 3% - with foster father). On the contrary, they have close relationships and strong attachment with other children in the family (40%) or with their peers and friends (17%).

Foster children were also surveyed with the help of the projective technique "Kinetic family portrait" (Berns and Kaufman, 2003; Liders, 2008) in order to analyse their perception of the general family situation and relationships with foster parents.

The analysis of foster children's pictures has shown that 42% of them perceive family situation as favourable, 58% - as unfavourable. There are significant discrepancies in the index "Proneness to conflict in the family" between children

samples. This index is higher in foster families with foster children with disabilities (t=2.93; p=0.0041), i.e. the situation is significantly more often perceived as a conflict one compared to perception of biological children with disabilities.

There are other indexes which characterise children's perception of the family situation in the pictures (favourable situation in the family, anxiety, hostility, a feeling of inferiority in the family); however, we haven't revealed any significant discrepancies in children's samples.

Only 30% of children's pictures depict all members of foster family engaged in common activity, and that shows a strong unity of members of the family and mutual interests. In the rest of the pictures (70%) each member of the family is busy with his/her own activity, or the whole family is depicted static, where members of the family are put into a line without any uniting activity which corresponds with a low level of interfamily unity.

Isolation of some family members in the pictures shows that the author is in conflict relationships with them. Some pictures depict isolation of all the members of the family from each other (13%), which reveals a serious malfunction of interfamily contacts. In 7% of pictures there is a general isolation of the family, and this can be interpreted as insularity of the family, isolation from the society.

In 40% of pictures there is a dimensional closeness between the members of the family, and that shows close emotional contacts inside the family. However, in 45% of pictures there is remoteness of the members of the family from each other and it is connected with dissociation of the family members and emotional distance between them.

43% of children's pictures have a lot of objects or images of pets, and that shows their great demand in emotional affection and communication and also lack of emotional communication in the family. These peculiarities can correspond either to the character of interfamily relationships or to a specific character of development of orphans who experienced lack of affection, love and care before they started living in a foster family.

23% of foster children's pictures depict aggressive symbols, such as sharp objects, arms, oversized fists, nails and teeth in the images of some foster family members.

Drawing a person, the author identifies himself/herself with this image to some extent, that is why significant functions and conflicts, connected with particular parts of body, are revealed when drawing not only himself but also other members of the family (Khomentauskas, 1986). Pictures of the majority of foster children with disabilities show specific peculiarities of the image of a person's body, which are revealed in the images of arms (their absence, exaggerated, short or hidden), legs (their absence, straddled, emphasized feet), face (emphasized mouth, empty eyes, absence of facial features, emphasized ears). In general, the above mentioned peculiarities of images say that the authors have communicative problems; they lack skills in social interaction. They are passive and need some support, and they also have psychological difficulties expressed in verbal aggression, negativism, self-absorption, suspiciousness, alertness, sensitivity to criticism, etc.

On the whole, foster children can perceive family situation as rather unfavourable due to several reasons: 1) foster children's undeveloped skills of interpersonal interaction and conflict solving, which prevents them from effective establishment of relationships with the members of the new family; 2) peculiarities of interfamily interaction in particular family, dysfunctions in the system of the family, foster parents' ineffective styles of upbringing; 3) difficulties caused by the processes of integration of a foster child into the family system, which are accompanied by painful emotional experience; these difficulties are overcome during 2-3 years (Oslon, 2006).

Prospect of a foster family

The results of the survey, conducted with the help of "Film-Test" by R. Gille, have been analysed and evaluated using the charts, characterising the child's personal emotional relationship with significant persons (foster mother, foster father and other relatives).

Foster children with disabilities lack positive attitude towards significant persons in their close circle. It causes difficulties in relationship with the latter (while biological children on the contrary demonstrate positive attitude to close people: mother: t= -4.38; p<0.001; to father: t= -7.28; p<0.001). At the same time, attitude to foster mother is more positive than to foster father, and it means that relationship with mother is closer. Foster children experience many problems in interaction with foster fathers. They are caused by difficulties in mutual understanding, lack of affection, father's reluctance to collaborate and general negative evaluation of relationship with foster fathers. The attitude to both foster parents is also characterised by lack of parental authority and problems in child-parent relationship (biological children demonstrate a pronounced positive attitude to both parents: t= -6.67; p<0.001). The attitude to the relatives of foster family bears a negative shade. It means that foster children experience difficulties in establishing relationships with them; they have no close interaction and attachment to these people (in contrast to biological children: t= -12.29; p<0.001). There is negative attitude and difficulties in communication with other authoritative adults (compared to biological children: t= -4.41; p<0.001).

On the whole, foster children with disabilities have significant difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships with adults. Possible reasons are certain psychological peculiarities of children without parental charge, such as: absence of aspiration for collaboration and mutual activity with adults, low cognitive activity, which causes difficulties in communication, anxiety, hostility and pragmatism towards an adult, etc. These peculiarities go together with children's acute need for attention and kindness of adults, and their expectation of approval and sympathy (Mukhina, 1989; Dubrovina and Ruzskaya, 1990; Shipitsina, 2005; Prikhozhan and Tolstykh, 2007).

Foster children also have difficulties in interaction and relationships with siblings, who live in the same family, and with friends (compared to biological children: to siblings: t= -4.36; p<0.001; to friends: t= -8.998; p<0.001). Thus, even interacting with other children, there are problems as lack of mutual understanding and difficulties in communication, which is the basis of any interrelations. This peculiarity is proved by a number of research works, which state that interpersonal relationships of orphans with peers can be characterised as poor and their communication lacks emotions. Forced communication with various other children in orphanage causes the situation when contacts with them become shallow, quick and irritable, and based on negative position towards them (Shipitsina, 2005; Prikhozhan and Tolstikh, 2007;).

The technique "Interview of a foster child" was also used in the study of prospect of a foster family. We will point out the most significant peculiarities.

88% of foster children have a positive prospect of a foster family, where they want to live in. They characterised such family as "good", "kind", "friendly", "affectionate", etc.

The majority of respondents (71%) have positive prospect of foster parents. They see foster parents as kind, loving, good, understanding and well off people. At the same time, 20% of children have no prospect of future foster parents. They experience significant difficulties in describing them. A fear of having "bad parents" dominated among 9% of respondents. They characterised prospective foster

parents as strict, frequently punishing, harsh, and emphasised that they are afraid of family conflicts and quarrels.

78% of foster children pointed out that their current foster parents absolutely coincide with their prospect of foster parents, while 15% of respondents said that their foster parents turned to be absolutely different from their prospect of them.

90% of foster children had a strong desire to live in foster family rather than in orphanage. 10% of respondents pointed out that they would like to live only in their biological family. 73% of respondents mentioned "bad life in the orphanage" as the main reason to live in a foster family. They described their life there as following: "Life is bad in the orphanage", "Elder children beat me", "I pick up bad habits", "I am educated poorly there". 22% of respondents pointed out that they agreed to live in the family because they wanted to have parents. At the same time, 5% of children decided to stay with the family in order to get a good education and to enter the university.

80% of foster children said that they have no fears about living in a foster family. While 39% of respondents mentioned the following fears: a fear of parental aggression (that they will turn to be bad and mercenary people; they will beat and punish), a fear of alcoholization of foster parents, a fear of going back to the orphanage, a fear of being separated with biological siblings.

76% of foster children expected positive feedback and actions from their new family, i.e. positive attitude towards them, love, acceptation, care, etc. 24% of respondents said that they expected nothing from their foster family. However, 93% of children pointed out that all their expectations came true and they have a family of their dream. At the same time, 7% of foster children confessed that their expectations didn't come true and their new family is far from their prospect.

DISCUSSIONS

The results of the research allow defining the main peculiarities of perception of relationships in a foster family by foster children with disabilities.

1. Foster children with disabilities are characterised by a very delicate attitude to their foster parents and interaction with them. Therefore, their behaviour can be treated as highly demanding, when children don't accept or agree easily. At the same time, foster children's evaluation doesn't coincide with foster parents' self-evaluation of the quality of their interaction with foster children.

2. In most cases foster children with disabilities are ready to establish a close relationship with foster parents. They expect affection, care, love and kindness from them, but at the same time they experience significant difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships, they can't collaborate or carry on a dialogue. They are inclined to confront, to be anxious and hostile towards others, and it prevents to establish mutually satisfying relationships between foster parents and their foster children.

3. In the family foster children with disabilities need affection and emotional comfort. They have a low level of claims; they are often dependant, especially on other children in the family or their peers. They tend to minimize their anxiety; however, at the same time their relationships with foster parents are dissociated.

4. In child's view of interfamily relationships there is some ambivalence: on the one hand, foster children say that they have positive relationships with foster parents and describe their foster family as friendly, affectionate and thoughtful; on the other hand, they view interfamily relationships as complicated, conflict, emotionally cold.

5. Foster children with difficulties experience many difficulties in establishing relationships with real members of foster family. They perceive adults, especially foster fathers, as non-authoritative, dominating, tough and emotionally cold. Foster mother, on the contrary, is usually seen as a sociable and active person, easy to interact with, that is why relationships with her is usually characterised as positive.

CONCLUSIONS

Studying peculiarities of establishment of interpersonal relationships between foster parents and their biological and foster children is a new and urgent branch in Russian psychological science. This is the time of collecting empirical data and analysing further directions of the research of a foster family and also opportunities to provide it a professional supervision.

The quality of relationships between foster children and foster parents is one of the most significant factors, which provides stability of a foster family. It is impossible to improve the effectiveness of child-parent interrelations without knowing peculiarities of their establishment in families with non-biological children, especially with those, who have disabilities, not knowing the main difficulties and how to overcome them.

Taking into account the problems mentioned above, we can offer the following recommendations addressed, firstly, to specialists of services, which supervise foster families, and representatives of Guardianship authorities, and also to the staff of orphanages. It is important to pay much attention to the questions of the quality of child-parent relationships, means that help to establish and develop genuine emotional attachment between foster parents and their foster children at every stage of foster family's functioning (starting from the process of preparation of children with disabilities to enter a foster family and orientation for prospective foster parents).

At the stage of mutual adaptation of foster parents and a new member of the family – a foster child – it is advisable that families take part in special programs which will allow to get to know each other better, to establish the first contact and emotional attachment and to learn how to maintain them. That will make the process of adaption less difficult for all members of foster family. Mutual trainings together with the assistance of supervising service will help to enlarge ways of expression of positive attitude to each other, to demonstrate affection and raise the level of mutual acceptance and tolerance.

A constant and systematic collaboration of foster parents with the specialists of services that supervise foster families and Guardianship authorities will contribute to a timely and qualitative psychological diagnosis of peculiarities of children with disabilities and counselling on emerging problems. If necessary, developmental classes should be organised for foster children with disabilities so that they could overcome difficulties in development and behaviour.

All in all, introduction of the mentioned above aspects into the system of supervision of foster families will encourage strengthening of child-parent relationships. It will extend the level of trust between foster children and their foster families and help to establish emotional connection between them.

The system of professional supervision of foster families in Russia and in Republic of Adygheya in particular is a new and developing trend. It demands both fundamental and applied researches, which can reveal different spheres of life and functioning of foster families in order to find more effective and optimal means of assistance and support of orphans and children without parental charge, especially if children are disabled.

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