

FOSTER CARE IN THE CONTEXT OF TRENDS AND CHANGES IN THE CONCEPT OF PARENTHOOD

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Abstract

The author perceives the contexts of contemporary changes through the lens of the problems of children growing up outside their biological family, e.g. in foster care and adoption, but also in various social and educational institutions. It asks whether the best interests of the child are not in fact more likely to be the interests of a specific section of parents with their own interests at heart, or those of adults who are part of ideological lobby groups. It highlights the fact that the upbringing and care of children growing up outside the biological family has a number of legal, ethical, psychological and educational aspects that are complicated to reconcile optimally for the benefit of the child at the present time.

Keywords

parenting, foster care, educational and social institutions

INTRODUCTION

One of the areas that has been significantly affected by radical technological, economic and social changes is foster care. This ranges from supportive families, such as au pairs, through various forms of fostering to adoption, and also includes those in designated educational, social and re-educational institutions. In doing so, there is pressure not only on so-called foster families, but also on social and educational institutions to ‚imitate‘ the family environment. We ask the question: Do we know or do they know what kind of family environment to imitate?

Fabián (2021, p. 135) articulates it presciently: ‚When we talk about foster family care, what kind of family do we mean? Is the foster family the one in which the child is placed, or is the foster family the interaction of families: the family in which the child is placed, including all the models of the original families of the children who are brought up in that family?‘

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At present, we cannot agree not only on what a family is, but also on what parenthood is and what the relationship is between someone having begotten a child and someone having given birth to a child. We accept what Možný (2008) claim that there is no „unified sociological theory of the family,“ just as there is no unified „family.“ However, it is also important to acknowledge that sociology is not the only discipline that deals with the family, and it is not optimal, in the spirit of constructivism, to reduce the family to a social construct and talk about it as such. It is not only biology (ethology) and psychology that offer a much more diverse view of it.

But the fact that there are new forms of ‚parenting‘, from assisted reproduction with a sperm donor to surrogacy – the carrying of a child by another mother for payment – shows, at the very least, that there are, in reality, biologically traditional and non-traditional forms of parenting, which certainly have their own psychological dimension. It is remarkable that these new forms are often positively presented by various lobby groups as an achievement of progress and ‚reproductive rights‘, but without any socio-psychological and ethical context. Another question arises: Is what is in the interest of the ‚parents‘ really also in the best interest of the child? Consequently, who is being helped in the helping professions? Whose side to be on? Yes, theoretically on the side of the child. But are we really doing that realistically?

One of the hallmarks of postmodernism is the relativisation of concepts, whereby within the framework of so-called political correctness (let’s face it, more ideological correctness), there is very often a significant marginalisation or even ostracisation of some traditional concepts and phrases. An example is the substitution, from the point of view of developing morality, of the key concept of education by terms such as care, behaviour modification, informal education or social skills training. These may or may not be linked to a connection with socially accepted moral values. The difference in terms of care and education is a difference in preferred values. While care can often be one-way, it mainly deals with the issue of the „quality of life“ of the individual, education is a two-way dialogic process (in more detail Škoviera, 2007).

Nor is the concept of a surrogate in the „course“. Replacement is usually still associated with inferior quality. Komárik (1999) argues that education cannot be substitute. Either it is or it is not education, in this context it is not important who implements it. The term foster family, commonly used in the lay public, is also actually incorrect nowadays, because de jure we have neither foster family nor fostering, only foster care. And if we have a family that adopts a child, it is not a foster family (Act 36/2005 Coll., Act 305/2005 Coll.). It is interesting to note that Act 279/1993 Coll. in Slovakia in 1993 created a professional foster family, but only three years later, after its „delimitation“ from the Education Department to the Social Department, it became „only“ a professional family. We ask: If a child grows up in a surrogate family environment, why should we not call those who raise and care for him/her surrogate parents?

Practical experience confirms that children want to be part of a family. They often want the separated parents to come back together, they idealise the parent/partner who does not live with them, sometimes they ‚look‘ for a new partner for their ‚free‘ parent. This

is true even if the family is a ‚surrogate‘ family. We have repeatedly encountered in practice that a child spontaneously took the surname of his or her foster parents, despite the fact that he or she subsequently had problems with it, e.g. at school. Professionally, we have encountered often dramatic stories of children who have had to cope with the revelation that they are growing up in „surrogate“ adoptive families.

Contemporary Slovak and Czech family

Globalisation is accelerating processes and changes in families, but above all in the way we ourselves think about the family. 30 years ago there was practically no possibility of „ordering a child“ to be carried out, homosexuals still claimed that they were only concerned with the legalisation of the relationship, they were not concerned with the possibility of adopting children, until 1990 it was the case that single people over 25 had a higher tax rate, about 60 years ago single mothers were 6% and girls were married at 21 and boys were married at 24 years old. Today none of that applies.

Tab. 1 „Traditional“ and contemporary family

50 years ago	Contemporary family
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Biological parents – married - Biological parent and other partner – usually married - Parent widowed or single parent - Adopted child of a married couple - Foster child of married couple 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Biological parents - unmarried - Biological parent and other partner – married - Biological parent and other partner – unmarried - Single parent purposefully single - Single parent after breakdown of partner relationship - Registered same-sex partners, one is the biological parent - Child adopted by a married couple - Child adopted by an unmarried couple - Child adopted by a heterosexual individual - Child in the foster care of an individual by one of the registered partners - Adoption Patchwork (composite) families <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - parents and children from different relationships, possibly + joint - Having both parents married once is the exception rather than the rule

According to Možný (2008) and Fabián (2021) – modified

The mobility and openness of society, but also the illegitimised and undeclared partner relationships by marriage, mean that we are often faced with completely new problems. These include, for example, multicultural parenting with a low degree of cultural compatibility, inter-ethnic and inter-racial biological and ‚surrogate‘ parenting, the adoption of our citizens abroad and international adoption from Slovakia or the Czech Republic, international ‚child abduction‘, child abduction by one of the biological parents, and many other problems.

There are a number of issues and problems associated with such major changes in the family. Just to illustrate, we will mention three:

First: What is the psychological and educational situation of the second (other) partner towards the partner’s biological children? How is power distributed in the new family? In what position is the partner? How do the children interpret this domestic relationship situation?

Second: Contemporary materialism often leads single mothers to hold two jobs in a complicated financial situation. On the one hand, they want to provide an economic standard for their children (and „replace“ the father), on the other hand, they consequently spend very little time with them, even alienating each other. This is commonly reflected in the problem behaviour of their children. Where is the expected positive gain here?

Third example: in surrogate parenthood, is the woman who carries the child merely an incubator? Is the client obliged to accept the child, even if he or she does not like the „product“? If longitudinal research (e.g., Langmeier and Matějček, 2011) shows that a wanted child is better off in many ways than an unwanted child, how is this the case?

Regarding the contemporary family, Šulová (2012) points out several differences when comparing it with families in the recent past.

- a) There is a lack of expectation of permanence of the relationship.
- b) Low stability of the relationship.
- c) Postponement of first marriage until older age.
- d) Postponing parenthood to a later age.
- e) Declining birth rates (a cultural and socio-economic phenomenon).
- f) Strong individualism in the family. Focus on the interest of the individual.
- g) Intimate relationships and permanent partnerships without being tied to natural consequences (unexpected pregnancies).
- h) Widely accepted premarital sexual experience.
- i) Maturity of partners and efforts to build the relationship.
- j) Aspirations of both parents within their individual careers (two-career family).
- k) Educational influence of the family replaced by institutions (sports, interest groups), which implies a limitation of contact between parents and children. What was provided by the family is provided by society.
- l) The blurring of the specificities of the female and male roles.

We believe that we can add to this „shortlist“ a few other suggestions of our own. These are:

- m) Educational insecurity of the competence of parents by professionals. The latter present sometimes diametrically opposed advice – from protectionism to a clear regime framework.
- n) Reducing children’s information dependence on parents and teachers. Children’s ICT skills are often at a higher level than those of their parents, and parents become dependent on children in this area.
- o) Administrative care. The mother does not prepare a snack for the child, she gives him money for it. But these cease to be a tangible „symbolic link“ between mother and child. (Škoviera, Murínová, 2012)
- p) In the past, the child was mostly received as a gift (although not always fully wanted), nowadays the child is often planned as a product (in time and number). We have different expectations from a product than from a gift.

A child who does not live with his or her biological family

The topic we are presenting can be seen from several perspectives. Perhaps the least complicated may at first sight appear to be the legal perspective. What is legal is, after all, legal and legitimate. Of course, this is only as long as the same legislation applies to us all the time. The problem arises where this is not the case. We remember the case of a certain girl who returned with her mother in 1980 from the then East Germany (GDR). In the GDR, as a 14 year old, she had a legitimate sex life; in Czechoslovakia she was „under the law“, taken away from her mother and, according to the customs of the time, placed in a re-education institution.

In many states, not only marriage but also adoption of a child by same-sex couples is legalized. There are states where neither is possible. However, this does not mean that such couples with children cannot move from one state to another. Even to a state where it is not legal. There, however, they run into complications. But is it really realistic to expect a state to allow dual legislation, or will the legislation be globally unified?

The removal of children by Barnevernet in Norway (and the unsuccessful efforts of the Michalak children’s mother), or similarly by the Social Service authorities in the UK (and the successful return of the Booras’ children to Slovakia), are confirmation that legality reflects not only what is considered morally acceptable and close to justice in that particular society, but above all what is agreed by the majority of legislators.

There is an understandable divergence, and even significant incompatibility, between the laws of different states. And we do not want to deal here with such a phenomenon as Islamic Sharia law.

Justice is related to legality and law. Despite the fact that we have a Ministry of Justice with its own agenda, justice is much more of an ethical category than a legal concept. Our favourite example: is it fair if Breivik (now Hansen), who killed 77 people, has three well-equipped rooms in a 30 m² prison, while others end up under a bridge through no fault of their own? Is that really ethical? It is legal.

Despite the fact that the Foucaultian concept of contextuality makes it possible to justify almost anything as acceptable, practice, even in an era of contemporary ethical flexibility or pragmatism, often puts us in a situation where we are dealing with an ethical dilemma. Like the mother in Capek's eponymous drama, when she reluctantly, but nevertheless, hands her son a rifle to go fight and says: „Go!“

One of the basic dilemmas in the context of the theme is when to leave the child in the family and when to place him in a substitute environment. The enormous growth of social workers has not yet led to fewer children growing up outside the biological family, neither in Slovakia nor in the Czech Republic, but it has led to an increase in bureaucracy and employment. Another ethical problem, a Czech-Slovak one, could be, for example, the placement of a child (often a Roma child or a child with a disability) for adoption abroad. How is it that such a child is not good enough for us to adopt, but is good enough for „people from abroad“? It is remarkable that our practice no longer sees this as an ethical problem at all. It is, after all, in the best interests of the child, or so they say. „He will be better off there“. But the best interests of the child should itself be primarily an ethical, not an economic, category.

For example, some research in the past has shown that the best adoptive parents are those parents who already have a biological child (Škoviera, 2007). However, among applicants, it is those who do not have a child who are commonly preferred. When we consider the long-term stable environment for the child, do we also take into account that unmarried couples are less stable than married ones? Do we favour the married? Or is that discrimination? Similarly with the ‚hot topic‘ of same-sex partners today.

We cannot leave out the psychological aspect of the whole subject. Fabián (2021) draws attention to differences in the starting line of children that are related to the family constellation:

- in the biological family, the newborn child always arrives as the youngest, as the weakest, the whole family adapts to the arrival of the child,
- in foster care, the child does not arrive as a newborn, often already 5–6 years old or older, but the child is expected to adapt to the routines of the foster family

Tab. 2 Children in different forms of foster care

Child	Time continuity		
	Past Common	Present Common	Future
+			
Biological family	yes	yes	yes
Adoption	rather no yes	yes	yes
Kinship fostering	partly	yes	partly
Non-relative fostering	no	yes	usually yes
Short-term foster care	no	yes	no
Children's home	no	yes	no

Source: author

Bowlby's theory of relational bonding – the attachment of the child in early childhood to a relational person (Hašto, 2005, Brish, 2011, Langmeier, Matějček, 2011) – is now widely accepted in the psychological community as fundamental in relation to the child's later functioning in life. Its basic starting points include separation and loss. In terms of optimal solutions, it is an open question to what extent to move children aged from about 6 months to about 3 years from the biological family, e.g., to a foster family for a temporary period and back again and sometimes repeatedly, but also to another foster family environment. In practice, this happens in real life.

There are other problems in terms of psychology. For example: the compatibility of the foster family environment and the child (with his/her history); the age of the child and the placement in the foster family environment; whether it is possible to bring up adopted children and own children in foster care in the same way when they do not have the same perspective. There is the complicated issue of kinship fostering of grandparents and grandchildren, particularly as they mature.

There are a number of psychological issues of emotionality and values that may not occur to children in ordinary families, but perhaps all children from non-biological families deal with them throughout their lives. These are questions about their basic identity: who am I? Who is my parent? Why didn't my biological family „want“ me? To whom (in the continuity of my life) do I belong?

When we think we belong to both this and that, who do we really belong to?

CONCLUSION

We know that the optimal environment for a child is a stable family environment. So if we really want to do something for children, let us not start with the children, but create the material, media, legislative and economic conditions for our families and theirs to be stable. Let us try to think that for a family, a pleasant time together around a campfire can be much more than an exclusive holiday. Economically, we can have „just about everything.“ But without children we will not have, in Matějček's words, an open future.

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