

Different experiences and outcomes of foster care

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A book translated to Finnish

- Pieni ja Poissa kotoa. Tutkimus pikkulapsista ja heidän suhteestaan aikuisiin laitoksissa, sijaiskodeissa ja kotona (Andersson 1989)

A textbook based on my thesis in psychology (1984)

Plan for my presentation

- International perspectives on foster care
- Register based outcome studies
- In-group variation and children's perspectives
- Birth parents of foster children
- Foster parents and their birth children
- Policy, state responsibility and social services

International perspectives on foster care

- In the book *How does foster care work? International Evidence on outcomes* (eds. Elizabeth Fernandez & Richard P. Barth, 2010) the British researcher June Thoburn has written a chapter. She shows how problematic it is to compare (14) countries because of different laws and different national statistics et cetera.

Different systems

- Thoburn, like many other authors, state that there are differences because of a *family support system* contra a *child protection system*.
- In countries with a family support system, like Sweden and mainland Europe, social services include family support.
- In Anglo-American countries like UK, USA and Canada social services intervene when protection is needed.

Child and adult welfare outcomes

- Thoburn states that, putting together the available data, the key variables impacting on long term child and adult welfare outcomes are age at placement, the emotional and behavioural characteristics of the child at the time of placement, whether or not the child was maltreated prior to placement and whether the carers and child have 'a sense of permanence'.

Continuation (Thoburn)...

- The groups who do badly in long term care are those who enter when older because they have serious problems and those who enter care when young but have multiple moves, or disruption of placement after several years, and not successfully placed with a new family with whom they put down roots.

Register based outcome studies (Sweden)

- Although most children are placed in foster homes, the residential care sector has increased, particularly with respect to teenage placements and as a result of an expansion of privately owned residential care facilities. In addition there are state-run secure residential care units for seriously delinquent youth. These are included in research on the epidemiology of out-of-home care (Vinnerljung et al).

Lower educational level

- Children placed in out-of-home care tend to perform poorly at school and have a lower educational level as adults than the majority population, and there are strong links between a low educational level and serious problems in adulthood.

Compared to the majority

- (Vinnerljung et al) 60,1 % in the majority population (born 1972-1979) have secondary school education but only 43,9 % in all child welfare groups taken together, and 55,0 % in the group with stable long term out-of-home care (foster care).

Higher risk of suicide and mental disorder

- For foster children the risk of suicide was 4.3 times as high and for other child care 2.7 times as high compared to the normal population.
- Suicide attempts in the aged group 13-17 is 0,38 % in the normal population and 1,67 % for those with experiences of long-term care and 1, 54 % for those in short term care.

Hospitalisation for any psychiatric disorder

- 0,41 % of 13-17-year-olds in the normal population have been in hospital for psychiatric disorders, and 3,05 % of those in long term care and 2,19 of those in short-term care.
- 0, 30 % of young adults (19-27) in the normal population and 2,02 % with experiences of long-term care, and 1,24 % with experiences of short-term care have been hospitalized.

Teenagers in out-of-home care

- Marie Sallnäs and Bo Vinnerljung have carried through a follow-up study of adults (25 years or older), who were entering out-of-home care 1991 and at that time were 13-16-years old. 60 % were placed in foster homes, 31 % in residential care and 9 % in secure units.

Teenagers with behavior problems

- The long-term outcomes show that, generally, boys tended to do worse than girls, and those placed for behaviour problems tended to do worse than those placed for other reasons.

Doing well...

- If 'doing well' is defined as an absence of seriously negative outcomes, i.e. being alive at age 25; not having been to prison or received a probation sentence at age 20-24; not having been hospitalized for a mental health problem at age 20-24; and not having become a teenage parent;
- then half of the girls (49 %), who were placed for behavioural problems, and 71 % of the girls, placed for other reasons, did well.
- The picture is darker for boys, 32 % who were placed for behavioural problems, and 67 % of the other boys, did well.

..in different placements

- Young people in secure units had a worse outcome than in other residential care, and residential care meant worse outcome than foster care. However, the dividing line was between behaviour problems and placement for other reasons.

More parents are dead...

- When young people are 18 years old 3, 6 % in the normal population have at least one deceased parent, and 26, 3 of those with experiences of out-of-home care.

In-group variation

- Children's relationship with their foster family is not always in accordance with the outcomes mentioned. But you will find more successful outcomes for children with a safe and stable relationship with his or her foster family – even if they return home in periods. Relationships matter.

Is it different to live in a foster home (for 10-year-olds)?

- No, there is no difference, not compared to how life is for other children.
- It is like living in an ordinary family.
- Actually, I do not feel any difference.
- Other people may say there is a difference, but I think I am about ordinary. Anyhow, I think I have it good.

Compared to live at home?

- It is better here than there (i.e. at home) because they were drinking too much.
- To live at home had been tough and I had not managed school well, my (foster)mum helps me quite a lot.
- To live here is different, doubly different, because when we lived at home there was only quarrelling and such things... I think they are kind here, everybody is kind here, here I have safety, yes, safety.

Continuation...

- I think other think they have it better just because they live with the person they call mum...But they are wrong... with mum I would have to be in my room as soon as she got sulky, I would have to sit in my room all the time until my homework was finished... and not understand when she would try to explain... and would not have any friends.

Birth parents of foster children

- Parents with children in foster care usually have an unstable social and economic situation, are often single mothers, have a weak social network, have problems with alcohol and drugs, mental illness and/or family violence etc.

... involving birth parents

- For foster carers it may be harder to cooperate with foster children's parents than to take care of the children.
- Still, it is important for foster carers to accept and encourage foster children's contact with their parents and/or extended family,
- and to be sensitive to the children's thoughts and views on arrangements.

Birth parents' perceptions..

- Ingrid Höjer (2009)... in cases where a positive working relationship between parents and foster parents existed, foster carers respected parents, informed them of the everyday life of children and included them in minor and major decisions about the child.

Foster parents and their birth children

- If foster care will succeed or not may be due to the child and his or her family background.
- It may also be due to the foster parents or the foster family, their own children included.
- But a suitable matching between foster family and foster child may be decisive.

The inner life of foster families

Ingrid Höjer's thesis:

- Fostering implies a serious amount of care giving, is mostly initiated by the women – who resides in the centre of the family.
- Fostering can make carers less observant of the situation of their own children, and sometimes even have a negative impact on these children.
- However, carers also report fostering to increase the children's empathic abilities.

Sons and daughters of foster carers (Höjer)

- Most of them valued their relationship with foster children,
- but fostering could imply complicated changes of everyday life,
- and they had to cope with conflicts connected to behavioural disorders of foster children,
- and gain knowledge about foster children's problematic lives.

Policy, state responsibility and social services

- Official reports from Sweden (and Norway, Ireland, Canada, Australia et cetera) about bad conditions and occurrences of abuse and offences and acts of cruelty in out-of-home care (from 1920 and forward)
- On-going governmental redress commission with the task to suggest official arrangements for redress and apology and suggestions how to prevent maltreatment in care in the future.