Analysis of professionals and family foster care on advantages and difficulties of visits between foster children and their biological families*

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In foster care, contact visits with birth families play an important role in relation to the child's wellbeing. Studies shown that the main advantages of contact are preserving relationships that can benefit the child, bringing a greater sense of continuity to both the child's life story and the process of identity development, enhancing the psychological well-being of the foster child and keeping alive the prospect of the child returning to live with the biological family (Farr, Grant-Marsney, & Grotevant, 2014; Taplin, 2005). In addition, that contact visits may contribute to more stable placements and help children both to understand their current situation and to have a more realistic view of their biological parents (Taplin, 2005). Other research has shown that contact with birth parents can be detrimental for children's well-being and makes adaptation to foster care more difficult (Haight et al. 2005; Moyers, Farmer & Lipscombe, 2006). Consequently, some authors strongly recommend that decisions about contact be made on a case-by case basis, weighing up the individual benefits and threats to the child (Prasad, 2011; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011; Taplin, 2005). The main aim of this study is to give voice to social workers and foster families about advantages and difficulties of contact visits.

METHOD

Participants

Two focus groups: 8 social workers from 4 foster care agencies in Andalusia (Spain) with responsibility for managing contact visits, and 8 foster families with considerable experience of contact visits (4 were recruited through the Association of Foster Families in Andalusia and 4 through fostering agencies).

Procedure, design and analysis

Access to foster care agencies and foster families was obtained through the official Andalusian Child Protective Services (SPM). The focal groups were audio-recorded.

Transcripts (of the two focus groups) gave rise to primary documents for the hermeneutic unit under study. All this information was exported from an Excel database to the ATLAS.ti v7.0 software. The transcripts were examined using an inductive method in order to identify themes among participants' responses

RESULTS

Opinions from the focus groups regarding the benefits of contact visits

The focus group of social workers and foster carers indicated that visits were important for a number of reasons (Table 1 and 2).

Table 1

The codes used and examples of statements made in the focus group of social workers regarding the value of contact visits

1.1. Maintain contact and ties with the biological family.

"Children may sometimes see the visits as just routine, but in the long run they're a good thing" (1:126).

1.2. Contribute to the child's identity and understanding of why he or she was taken into foster care.

"Visits are important if the child is to develop a sense of identity and a life story" (7:3).

1.3. Provide children with a realistic view of their birth family, avoiding idealization.

"Visits are a way of preventing the child from idealizing the biological family" (3:4).

1.4. Reduce uncertainty and distress in the child.

"Children relax and feel less insecure when they see their mother during visits" (6:2).

Table 2

The codes used and examples of statements made in the focus group of foster carers regarding the value of contact visits

2.1. Maintain contact and ties with the biological family.

- *"Visits help the child and mother to maintain an attachment (5:14) and to cope with separation"* (5:131).

2.2. Contribute to the child's identity and understanding of why he or she was taken into foster care.

"Visits are good for the child because they've helped her understand why she was taken into care. Now she knows the reality and she's more relaxed with us" (1:4).

2.3. Provide children with a realistic view of their birth family, avoiding idealization.

"It makes them aware of what things are really like for their parents" (3:9).

2.4. Reduce uncertainty and distress in the child.

"Visits are always a good thing because they stop the child from feeling that he's letting his mother down" (3:17).

2.5. Facilitate reunification with the biological family.

"They can play a part in family reunification and prevent the foster placement from breaking down" (1:2).

Difficulties related to visits that were raised in the focus groups

The difficulties identified by social workers and foster carers in relation to visits are shown in Table 3 and 4.

Table 3

The codes used and examples of statements made in the focus group of social workers regarding difficulties related to contact visits

3.1. Lack of coordination between social workers from the fostering agencies and the Child Protective Service (CPS)

"The CPS should give more weight to our decisions as social workers when reporting on visits" (8:63).

3.2. Complaints about the CPS.

"The CPS doesn't always respect the rules we've established about how visits should be run (e.g., taking photos of the children, the relatives who are allowed to be present during the visits, etc.)" (6:127).

3.3. Lack of safety in relation to the behavior of some biological families.

"There's a safety issue with visits because some biological relatives can be violent" (4:82).

3.4. Disagreement with some of the behavior shown by the birth family during visits.

"Some biological parents change the child's clothes or hairstyle during visits" (5:40).

3.5. Birth family has negative attitude towards the foster carers.

"The birth family still has a negative view of the foster carers" (3:36).

3.6. Birth family gives the child inappropriate messages during visits.

"When the child has siblings who still live with the biological family they often say inappropriate things to the foster child, for example, that they're better off with the biological family because they have more freedom and aren't told so much what to do" (3:116).

Table 4

The codes used and examples of statements made in the focus group of foster carers regarding difficulties related to contact visits

4.1. Lack of coordination between social workers from the fostering agencies, the Child Protective Service (CPS), and the foster family.

"There should be more planning meetings between social workers, the CPS, and foster families" (8:98).

4.2. Complaints about the CPS.

"We sometimes here out of the blue about the decisions which the CPS has made about the child's future. More information needs to be shared about the decisions that are made so that children can be better prepared for their future" (7:104).

4.3. Lack of safety in relation to the behavior of some biological families.

"More protection is needed with respect to some biological families. Sometimes they spy on the foster family" (2:102).

4.4. Birth family has negative view of the foster carers.

- *"The biological relatives give the child a negative picture of the foster family"* (5:57).

4.5. Visits produce distress, anxiety, and a conflict of loyalty in the child.

- *"Sometimes the visits confuse the child and produce doubts and fears"* (1:35).

4.6. The biological family gives the child false expectations.

"The biological parents sometimes lie to the children and give them false hopes about returning to live with them" (9:49).

4.7. Complaints related to attending the place where visits are held.

"As a foster mum I must admit it's complicated getting the children to the place where visits are held, although I also believe it's good for them" (6:56).

4.8. The foster carers have a negative view of the biological family, which they pass on to the child.

- *"Sometimes we think we're better than the child's biological family"* (6:134).

DISCUSSION

Results show that both groups agreed on the utility of visits to maintain the children's attachment to their birth family, to bring a greater sense of continuity to the children's life story, to enhance the psychological wellbeing of the foster children and to know the real situation of their birth family. In relation to the difficulties, one of the issues mentioned by both groups refers to a lack in the coordination among the social workers, the SPM and the foster families involved. The other issue brings together several complaints to the SPM, such as the fact of not providing information about taking decisions regarding the future of the child; the lack of support and preparation about visits; as well as the shortage of social workers and economic aids provided by the SPM.

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