

Abstract

Title The Inner Life of Foster Families

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Key Word Foster families, Family relations, Everyday life, Gender perspectives

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ISBN 91-86796-31-3

ISSN 1401-5781

The study focuses on family relations in the homes of foster carers. The aim of the study is to find out what impact fostering has on marital relations, on relations between parents and children, and also explore relations between biological children and foster children. A gender perspective runs throughout the study; what differences could be seen in the way foster mothers and foster fathers handle the task of fostering?

The data collection consists of two parts: A questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews with foster carers. Questionnaires were sent by post to 550 foster carers. 50% of the questionnaires were sent to foster mothers, and 50% to foster fathers, which meant that either the man or the woman was the receiver of a questionnaire. 366 foster carers answered, 192 women and 174 men. 34 foster carers have been interviewed; the wife and husband in 17 foster families. 12 of the foster families had more than three years experience of fostering. Five couples had just started as foster carers, these five couples have been interviewed three times within the lapse of 18 months. Interviews were made with women and men separately.

Most foster carers live in long and stable relationships with their partners, and often have a traditional way of organising their everyday life. In such families, few negotiations are needed to keep family life working. The woman resides in the centre of the family, and from this central position she has both a general view and control over family members. Fostering implies a serious amount of care giving, therefore it is mostly initiated by women. Men eventually also get involved in the task of fostering, which has an impact on family relations. To manage, both men and women need to engage themselves in hard work. Men are forced to be more involved in family life than they used to be. Hereby, fostering creates a change, men are sharing the central position which used to belong to women only. Men and women become a "team", working towards a mutual goal. Women highly appreciate this sharing of the central position. Both men and women need to reflect upon their partnership and their parenthood, which is one of the rewarding parts of fostering. Less rewarding aspects are that fostering makes carers tired, and drains them of energy. Foster carers also experience responsibility for something they do not have the power to influence, as they do not have custody of foster children. Care within the home is often highly valued socially, but less valued pecuniary, which may be one reason why foster carers have difficulties in explaining payment to children, and also to friends and colleagues. Fostering can make carers less observant of the situation of their own children, and sometimes even have a negative impact on these children, but carers also report fostering to increase emphatic abilities of children.