

THE SOCIAL WORKER'S IMPORTANCE IN FOSTER CARE CASES

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Abstract: *The paper addresses the topic of family placement, this field being a very complex one, full of benefits, difficulties and of course problems. Social work in the field of foster care emerged as a response to the multitude of social problems that target abandoned children or children coming from dysfunctional families, who cannot live with their biological family, thus living with a "substitute" family. The qualitative research aims to identify the indicators that contribute to the success of a foster care case, the importance of the work of the social worker and the multidisciplinary team and the problems they face. In conclusion, foster care, although it has many shortcomings and problems of an organizational nature, is a second chance for less fortunate children to have a family and a life as close to normality as possible. The social worker plays a crucial role in the foster care process, aiming to create a safe and supportive environment for the child and facilitate a smooth and beneficial transition into his new family environment.*

Keywords: social worker, abandoned children, foster care, special protection, personalized intervention plan.

1. Introduction

According to specialized literature, the child protection system is characterized as a set of social services offered by the state, with the aim of supporting children who encounter various difficulties, and through social assistance services it can offer : material aid, a home in case of abandonment, medical and educational assistance (Roth, 2000: 70). Child protection services mainly address the following categories of children: victims of abuse, children who are or are to be adopted, children who have been temporarily or permanently abandoned in state institutions for various reasons, children who are part of marginalized minorities, family placement or substitute family, victims of discrimination, orphans, etc. (Zanca, 2010: 85).

The child protection system has two primary roles (Zanca R., 2010: 82): to offer specialized services to children facing difficulties of any nature and to persuade the legislative framework to be able to provide the best services to children.

One of the main institutions active in the field of child protection is the General Directorate of Social Care and Child Protection (GDSCCP), whose mission is to provide social care services that meet the needs identified among vulnerable groups, in order to improve the quality of life and provide a certain level of social security to the beneficiaries. GDSCCP has duties regarding the protection of children in situations of family abandonment, ill-treatment of minors, more precisely in everything related to the physical and mental safety of minors.

2. Social work and foster care

With the aim of protecting the child's best interests #, social services seek to satisfy the child's needs, for example: physical, educational, psychological development, belonging, etc. (Roth, Antal and Călian, 2019: 12).

In order to be able to offer a child the highest quality services, social services collaborate closely with all the institutions that influence the child's development, the most important ones being: the school (since education is a factor of great importance for his life and future), the medical system (the health status of the beneficiary is paramount), and of course the foster care system, if this is the case and the child has been separated from the

family (maternal caregiver or foster family), etc. Specialists conclude that this collaboration, if carried out in good conditions, can be extremely beneficial in the physical and mental development of the beneficiary, being like a “corporate parent” for the assisted young person and define it as a “professional protective shield” for children in need (Guishard-Pine, McCall and Hamilton, 2007: 110-111).

In our country, the services offered to children are characterized by preventing institutionalization and choosing an alternative care method such as: family placement, placement with a professional maternal assistant or adoption, which are much more favourable for the child’s optimal development, by offering a family environment to heal the wounds acquired as a result of abandonment (Zanca, 2010: 85). Family placement with a person with whom, preferably, the child has an attachment bond, for example: a member of the extended family, is more beneficial because it minimizes the risks of rejection, for this reason, it is a method that takes precedence over placement to the professional maternal assistant (Grigore, 2021: 406).

Every child needs attention, love, protection and a sense of security in order to have a proper development, these aspects being characteristic of a healthy family environment. Unfortunately, many children do not experience this, some come from toxic environments, suffer traumatic experiences, witness tragic events, experience unimaginable abuse (physical and mental) or are abandoned, and these factors leave a permanent imprint on their psyche (Luke, 2014: 15-16).

Since ensuring the child’s safety always comes first, the legislation in force opts in favour of placing children with extended family members, up to and including fourth degree relatives, and if this fact is not possible the best alternative is the professional maternal assistant whose aim is to care and raise the child (Grigore, 2021: 407).

In the case of a child under 3 years old, this can only be entrusted to the extended family, a residential type service and the maternal assistant, depending on the case and possibilities. In the case of a child up to 7 years old, who suffers from some form of disabling, serious locomotor problems or is in a state of dependence, this will be placed in a residential centre (Roth, Antal and Călian, 2019: 13). The placement measure is implemented only after the case manager performs a complex matching process in order to identify the family, person or foster carer who is the most suitable compared to the child’s needs and preferences (Grigore, 2021: 408).

Bejenaru (2011: 73-74) considers institutionalization to be a form of child protection with a very high insufficiency because it directly affects the children’s psychological development in a negative way and has substantially harmful effects on them, it being desirable to resort to alternative methods such as fostering or adoption. The development of social, emotional and cognitive skills, in the view of the authors Collins W. A. and Laursen B., has the most important point in childhood, being able to affect functional adaptation and the future of interpersonal relationships in adult life (Golu, 2021: 46).

An extremely important aspect in the case of placement is stability. Numerous studies have been carried out, which indicated that the placement measure has a beneficial impact on the children’s psycho-motor development, if they do not experience changes in the foster carers or the foster family. Every child has the right to feel loved, protected and to lead a life without considerable deprivation, and this is the parents’ responsibility, but unfortunately there are many cases where, for various reasons, this responsibility remains with the extended family, relatives or specialized authorities (Grigore, 2021:404).

3. Involvement of the social worker in family foster care cases

Abandonment is a traumatic, dehumanizing experience that can have serious lifelong repercussions. Many parents, constrained by situations and problems, have decided to abandon their children, to give them up for adoption. This decision has long-term

repercussions and is a period generally characterized by strong emotions, thoughts and remorse (Onici, 2021:88).

The social worker working in child protection has many duties and responsibilities, the main obligation being to respect the child's best interests and with priority to try and keep the child in the family environment. If life with the family of origin represents a risk for the child, then the social worker responsible for the case must identify the "resource persons" presented in the beneficiary's life, more precisely those with whom the child established attachment bonds, is familiar with (extended family, friends), so that the trauma of separation from one's parents not become "deeper" and to be able to feel safe (Grigore, 2021: 412).

According to the legislation in force, the social worker has the following obligations towards the beneficiary: to ensure that the child can develop positively from a physical and mental point of view, to have a family and socio-affective balance, to involve the child's family actively in taking decisions and in following the child's development and even care in the family environment, depending on the child's maturity, to take into account the child's wishes and opinions, to thoroughly analyse the child's history, taking into account the potential toxic, dehumanizing situations to which the child may have been subjected, and to maintain a good relationship with the people with whom the child has emotional ties (Law 272/2004, art. 2).

In specialty literature, according to the interviews conducted by Butler I. and Williamson H., the social worker's characteristics are presented according to the children's views:

- to listen to what the children have to say without ridiculing them,
- not to judge them, nor try to impose their ideas, but to explain them and suggest the actions they would like to implement,
- to be open and not look at them with superiority,
- to be able to make a joke to set the mood,
- to be direct in expressing, not make empty promises,
- to keep confidentiality and ask for the children's opinion when they want to pass on information (Zanca, 2010: 98).

Another characteristic belonging to a good practitioner is the effective collaboration with the multidisciplinary team. In order to overcome the crisis situation, the social worker must analyse and mobilize the client's capacities to face the problem (Hurubean, 2011: 529). In order to provide specialized assistance to families and children in need, in many areas of interest, the multidisciplinary team can be made up of: social worker, psychologist, counsellor, psycho-pedagogue, doctor, etc. (Gherguț, 2011: 959).

4. Qualitative research

The qualitative research *aimed* to identify the indicators that contributed to the success of a foster care case, the importance of the social worker's work and that of the multidisciplinary team and the problems they faced. The method used was a sociological survey based on an interview guide.

The formulated *objectives* were:

- *Objective 1*: Success of a foster care case.
- *Objective 2*: The importance of the social worker's work and that of the multidisciplinary team.
- *Objective 3*: Problems faced by social workers in foster care cases.

Three thematic units corresponding to 11 support questions were formulated and the interview guide was applied to 39 social workers from the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection Caraș-Severin.

After analysing the data from the conducted interviews, we can conclude the following:

- ✓ According to the social worker's view, the success of a family placement case can be evaluated by several criteria, and these depend on the specific objectives and needs

belonging the child involved. The specified indicators that can help define success in a foster care case are:

- The child's wellbeing and development:
 - health status: if the child's health status improved and was properly managed during the placement;
 - school progress: school performance and participation in educational activities;
 - emotional and social development: the child's ability to form healthy relationships and cope with emotional changes.
- The child's adaptation to the family through the degree of connection and stability in the relationship with the family and the child's involvement in family activities and the relationship with other family members;
- The reunification with the biological family by evaluating progress in this direction;
- The support provided to the biological family: assessing how the biological family receives support and resources to improve parenting skills and solve family issues;
- The integration into the community by involving the child in community activities and services, thus developing positive connections outside the family environment;
- Advice and support to manage challenges that may arise during the placement.
- ✓ The social worker's activity in the context of family placement consists of: initial assessment, preparation and training of foster families, monitoring and evaluating the child's evolution of the child in the new environment and in relationship with the foster family, emotional support, steps to reunify the child with the biological family. This involves assessing the child's well-being and identifying any problems or difficulties that may arise.

✓ The multidisciplinary team plays an essential role in foster care to ensure that all relevant aspects of the child's life are considered and addressed appropriately. This team involves professionals from different fields such as social workers, psychologists, doctors, educators and other specialists who work together to support the child and the foster family. Here are some aspects of the roles of the multidisciplinary team in foster care as stated by the respondents:

- the members of the multidisciplinary team contribute to the assessment of child's needs and capacities and those of the biological family, as well as the foster family. This assessment may include medical, psychological, educational and social aspects;
- psychologists and social workers in the team offer counselling and emotional support both to the child and to the families involved in the placement process;
- the multidisciplinary team works together to develop and implement a care and support plan for the child. This involves coordinating the services provided by different professional areas to ensure a holistic approach. It also regularly monitors the child's progress in the fostering environment and in the relationship with the foster family. Periodic evaluations ensure the necessary adjustments in the individualized protection plan;
- members of the multidisciplinary team collaborate to encourage and facilitate bonding between the child and one's biological family, including exploring reunification options.

✓ Social workers face a number of challenges and problems in managing foster care cases. These may vary depending on the specific circumstances of each case, but there are some common issues they may face:

- the rigid bureaucratic system - social workers unanimously believe that bureaucracy makes it difficult to carry out one's activity and reduces the time they can allocate to meetings with the beneficiary and the foster family,
- the cases overload - all specialists believe that the workload is too high and affects their well-being because they face a lot of stress, fatigue, even depression. They believe that it would be ideal for a social worker to have between 20 and 30 cases at most, but the reality of the system does not allow it, and even shows increases in this regard.

- the stigma of foster care services - social workers presented incidents from their professional lives, in which they were confronted with the fact that this field is controversial, especially due to the fact that the population does not understand that the purpose of the measures taken by them is to defend the child's interests. The social work in foster care is misunderstood due to mass misinformation and this fact causes specialists to face misconceptions, as: "*you want to take people's children? To ruin families?*"
- the lack of staff - the reasons why the Caras-Severin Child Care Direction constantly faces staff turnover are due to workload, stress and the need for modernization. This human shortage directly affects the beneficiaries because they do not have a stable social worker-client relationship, this needing time to strengthen as such.
- insufficient resources are a problem, because there are more children in difficulty than the existing funds, so there is a limitation of actions that can be taken.

5. Conclusions

Foster care is a form of alternative care for children who, for various reasons, cannot remain in the care of their biological parents. This type of care involves placing children in the care of a foster family. The main purpose of foster care is to provide a safe and stable environment in which the child can grow and develop.

Success in a foster care case depends on an ongoing commitment of all parties involved, including social workers, foster families, children and other professionals from the multidisciplinary team. A supportive environment and adequate resources help maximize the chances of success in foster care.

Factors that can facilitate a smooth course of a family placement case were also identified: the counselling offered to the beneficiaries, the harmonious relationship with the foster family and the beneficiary (this factor having a high importance in avoiding conflicts, establishing collaboration and effective communication), but also the social worker's behaviour (being empathetic, understanding, without prejudice and not having an attitude of superiority towards anyone).

Through the collaboration of the multidisciplinary team members, an attempt is made to create an integrated and coherent environment that supports the development and child's well-being during the foster care period.

The social worker is extremely important in the implementation of family placement. Social workers encounter many difficulties and strive to provide quality services even though they are overworked and overloaded. Due to the large caseload, social workers may have difficulty providing individualized monitoring and support to each child and each foster family.

Administrative requirements can add additional burden and delay processes, affecting the effectiveness of the intervention. Social workers must navigate a complex legal framework, including placement proceedings. Also, difficult cases, which frequently involve situations of suffering and trauma, can have an emotional impact on social workers. Solving these problems often requires collaborative efforts between social workers, other involved professions and the community as a whole. Also, continuous support from the administration and adequate resources can help improve the effectiveness of social services.

The social worker, together with the multidisciplinary team, plays a very important role in the family placement process, aims to create a safe and supportive environment for the child and facilitate a smooth and beneficial transition in the new family environment.

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