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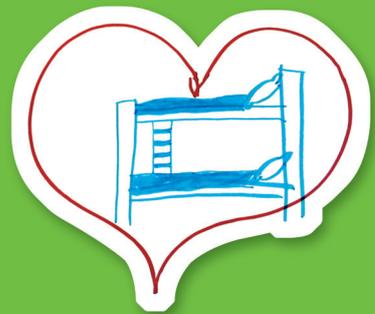
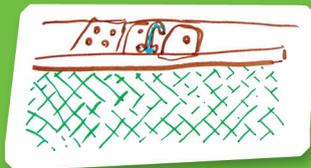
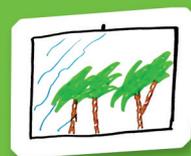
Tolerancija

POVJERENJE

Ravnopravnost

What Children Say about Foster Care

A study of the children's perspective on foster care with recommendations for improvement



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What Children Say about Foster Care

A study of the children's perspective on foster care with recommendations for improvement



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We would like to thank all the participants in this research who shared with us their personal stories and became “silent but indispensable” co-authors of this publication.

We would also like to thank the Forum for Quality Foster Care for allowing us to use the poster, parts of which were utilized for the cover page. Special thanks go to the young people in foster families who made the poster.

The authors and the UNICEF Office for Croatia

Forewords

Systematic improvement of foster care for children in Croatia is one of the important functions of the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth. On this note, it is necessary to link all the factors, every one of which must contribute within their jurisdiction so a child in care does not grow up in a children's home, but a family, if not biological or adoptive, then certainly a foster family. Any stay in a facility should be short, especially for young children, and mainly serve the purpose of determining the child's physical and mental state, family care or previous therapeutic interventions. Foster care should utilize every available resource of the social welfare system.

Social welfare centers provide the legal framework for foster care, supervise it, educate and license foster parents, make important decisions for the child.

Welfare institutions (children's homes, group homes, rehabilitation centers, etc.) are being deinstitutionalized and transforming in most cases into CENTERS FOR CHILDREN (centers for providing services to children). Valuable expertise and facilities will be used to provide services to children and families in the community: multidisciplinary diagnosis of the child's needs and family circumstances, in-home work in order to prevent institutionalization, early intervention, ongoing professional support for families, as well as assistance and monitoring of foster care.

The foster parent is our partner and has valuable social tasks. In the near future and as soon as possible, using the specified professional support and monitoring, we plan to improve the status of foster families by ensuring some employment rights and opening the possibility of foster care as a profession.

The Ministry will continue to support all activities of organizations which provide services in this field and make foster care better for children.

UNICEF is a very important partner of the welfare system; its projects are highly valued and have left a strong mark, triggering changes for the better in the area of foster care.

Both at the beginning and at the end of our deliberations is his majesty the child: The best interests and perspectives of the child must be the guiding principle in all of the above activities. Those of us that make decisions for and on behalf of the child and determine his or her life bear a great responsibility. The child's participation in these decisions is necessary as much as possible, considering age and maturity. This is our duty and their right.

The UNICEF publication What Children Say about Foster Care is the voice of the foster child. It warns us, suggests, praises, criticizes, and wants to be respected. Let this voice lead us to better solutions in child care and better quality foster care.

*Jasna Ćurković Kelava, MD
Assistant Minister of Social Policy and Youth*

Advocacy of family care for every child is one of the key areas of UNICEF's work in Croatia. Working together with all interested parties, we strive to reach a common goal – reducing the number of children in institutions. It is certainly in the best interest of every child to grow up in his or her birth family. However, in cases when this is not possible and separation is in the best interest of the child, UNICEF strongly endorses foster family care over institutional care until conditions are right for the child's adoption or return to the birth family.

A number of activities have been undertaken over the years to reduce the number of children in institutional care and increase the number of children who have the opportunity to grow up in a family. Through them, we tried to incorporate the media, citizens, businesses, policy makers and experts, while this research and publication includes and underscores children's insights, experiences and attitudes. From public campaigns to permanent changes, we have continuously used various forms of education and research to educate and sensitize professionals in the field of social welfare and justice, as well as the public in general, about the harmful effects of institutional care on children, especially the youngest. Also, we have been committed to providing professional support and continuing education for foster families, so that they could get the necessary support and care for foster children in the most appropriate way. In doing so, what we consider especially important is not to lose sight of the most vulnerable children, the youngest, with disabilities, with problems and/or behavioral disorders.

Of course, we cannot have a complete picture of the quality of the foster care system and how it can be improved unless we talk about it with those most affected by this form of care, the children themselves. Participation of children in actions and decisions that affect them would remain an unclaimed principle of the Convention on the Rights of the Child unless we allowed children to tell us their views, fears, memories, suggestions. That is why we supported this research, with the hope that the results and findings will contribute to the formation of a truly better system of foster care in Croatia.

A ten-year-old who does not know the reasons for separation from his primary family and, after years of being away from his family, still cries when talking about these memories is a warning to us all that we must do even more in order for the foster care system to truly appreciate and respect the rights of those for which it was established, which is to say its users, children.

We look forward to future activities and continued cooperation with the Ministry of Social Policy and Youth, foster parents, NGOs, professionals, children, because only if we join together can we achieve a common goal – for as few children as possible to spend their childhood in institutions.

*Lora Vidović
Head of the UNICEF Office for Croatia*

Table of Contents

1 Introduction	8
1.1 The Children's Perspective	9
1.2 Foster Care of Children	15
2 Research Objectives	18
3 Research Methodology	20
3.1 Methodological Framework	21
3.1.1 Child participation in research	21
3.1.2 Ethical considerations	22
3.2 Research Participants	24
3.3 Data Collection Methods	26
3.3.1 A review of the data collection process and the experience of conditions in which the data was collected	27
3.4 Data Analysis Methods	32
4 Overview of Research Results	34
4.1 Data Analysis for Individual Participant Subsamples within the Given Framework	35
4.1.1 Foster children	36
4.1.2 Foster adolescents	45
4.1.3 Children and adolescents placed in a children's home following inadequate foster care	58
4.1.4 Birth children of foster parents	74
4.1.5 Adults with experience of living in foster care as children	86
4.2 Thematic Analysis of Data from All Participant Groups	111
5 Conclusions and Recommendations	128
6 Participation of Children – from Active Participation to Partnership with Researchers	134
7 Bibliography	140
8 Appendix	146
8.1 Interview Drafts	147

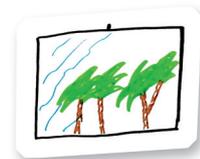
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Introduction

“The conceptual framework of the research is defined by connecting two phenomena – the children’s perspective, or view of themselves and the conditions in which they live, and foster care as regarded from a professional perspective.”

The research entitled Children's Perspective on Foster Care was motivated by the knowledge that, in Croatia, there is a shortage of information on how children feel about foster care and other forms of public child care, as well as how they experience foster care and what they take away from it. In accordance with efforts in researching this subject, the broadest scope of this study is defined by connecting two phenomena – the children's perspective, or view of themselves and the conditions in which they live, and foster care as regarded from a professional perspective. The conceptual framework of the research is based on the examination of these phenomena.

1.1 The Children's Perspective



The imperative of the children's perspective in all matters concerning the child is considered to be an axiom of civilization, based on articles 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2007), and the necessity of this perspective will not be further elaborated in this text. We will, however, further elaborate the possibility and necessity of taking into account the children's perspective in situations where the child is the beneficiary of a social intervention, due to the fact that this paper also addresses the children's perspective as the user perspective.

The user perspective is the manner in which the beneficiary of an intervention perceives themselves and the world around them, including the intervention and the context in which it is implemented (Žižak 2010a). Foster care is a specific form of care outside the birth family in which the quality standards of care should be closer to those in a family, rather than an institution. Consequently, the conceptual framework of this research takes into account children's opinions, experiences and assessment of the continuum from life in their own family to life in a foster family. A review of the literature indicates that the focus of research on the children's perspective is directed differently in studies of the child's opinions and/or experiences of their own placement in foster care.

First and foremost, it should be noted that the literature indicates that children are reliable sources of information about themselves and their behavior, family, school, activities and peers (Žižak and Koller-Trbović 2006). According to Forehand (1990), when children aged six to 16 years provided this type of information about themselves in semi-structured interviews, correlation with data obtained from the mothers was 80%. Correlation was higher than average when discussing facts (84%) and somewhat lower when discussing psychosocial processes (69%). Examining the literature on the subject of impact of the family on child development, Pederson and Gilby (1986, as cited by Žižak and Koller-Trbović 2006) note that relatively little is known about children's experience and understanding of the family.

The improvement of understanding of the way children learn and form concepts in general, stands out as one of the main reasons for studying children's concept of family. Since it is to be expected that personal experience influences the formation of the concept of family, studying the concept of family could provide further insight into the impact of personal experience on the formation of cognitive concepts. A review of the available literature by the same authors reached the following conclusions:

- young children (preschoolers) have a profoundly different concept of family than older children and adults
- there is no pronounced link between children's understanding of the concept of family and experience in their own family
- children and adults have a very similar (stereotypical) idea of a family prototype, and the differences that exist between them (in relation to the number of members, place of residence, the presence of a third-generation) are more associated with the degree of cognitive development of the child than with their own family experience
- children tend to retain the stereotypical image of the family.

Research on children's perception of themselves in the family, their parents, family life and risks specific to the family identified a number of areas where children's opinions are essential. For example (Hoek 2006; Evans 2008; Olszewski, Burkhart and Bo 2010):

- the role of parents and family members
- listening to and respecting children's opinions
- in what way and to what extent children are consulted in the making of decisions about family life
- time children spend with family members
- discipline and punishment in the family
- discrimination against children in and outside the family
- playtime and household chores
- exposure to stressful events and children's assessment of events
- coping strategies for stressful events (poverty, illness, parent addiction, etc.).

Most of the available research on children's perspectives on foster care is foreign¹. Given that the focus of this research is the perspective of foster and birth children, researched and described through a qualitative approach, the following text will present a brief overview of the results of foreign studies with similar theoretical and methodological approaches.

¹ There is no known published domestic research on children's perspectives on foster care, although focus groups were conducted with foster children and birth children of foster parents as part of the project "Training of Experts, Professionals and Foster Parents in the Area of Foster Care in the Republic of Croatia (2003 – 2006)" which was conducted by the Centre for Social Policy Initiatives from Zagreb. To the best of the authors' knowledge, official data gathered in the focus groups was not published.

- ➔ Research undertaken with **foster children** by Wilson et al. (2004) showed that most children have a positive experience of care in a foster family. Foster children mostly express common needs: a normal family life, encouragement, respect, basic information about their rights, adequate education and contact with their birth families. Estimated satisfaction of children in foster care depends on the following factors: the care they receive in foster care, their relationship with their birth families, the balance of their relationship with foster and birth families, reasons for placement in foster care, predictability and stability of their living conditions, possibility of leading a normal life. Satisfaction is higher when more attention is paid to these factors.
- ➔ Johnson, Yoken and Voss (1995) conducted a study with **children in foster care**, aged 11 to 24 years. The research participants' recommendations focused on informing children about major events affecting their lives, reducing and dealing with the trauma associated with displacement from their homes and increasing contact and cooperation among children, birth parents, foster parents, and professionals. Children in this study also described a sense of shame and general dissatisfaction with the manner in which they were separated from their family (for example, police involvement, separation at school, etc.). Some of them stated that they felt as if they were to blame for the displacement.
- ➔ Results of the research conducted by Whiting and Lee (2003) using the qualitative ethnographic research method on a sample of 23 **children with foster care experience** indicate that most children are satisfied with their current placement and care. Most of the children often experience foster care as a challenging and sometimes traumatic combination of events and emotions. Although they generally recognize the necessity for separation from their birth family and acknowledge their foster parents, they often feel confused, scared and angry about their experiences.
- ➔ Browne and Maloney (2003) researched how **visiting and contact with birth parents** affect foster children. Research showed that children whose placements were categorized as **ambiguous** (in the sense of being neither successful nor critical, the other two placement categories) were more likely to have infrequent visits with their parents. These children exhibited more confusion in relation to their own future. The authors also report that the reaction of children to parental visits is not always positive.
- ➔ A study that dealt with the experiences of **separation and placement in foster care** from the perspective of children aged eight to 14 years, conducted by Folman (1998), indicated that the separation process is often ineptly and inadequately handled by professionals. The research showed that children separated from their families suffer numerous losses, especially if they are not placed together with their siblings. Regarding children, there are a number of risks associated with a lack of information, uncertainty and a lack of acknowledgment of their emotions such as loss and pain.

- ➔ The results of a study conducted by Chapman, Wall and Barth (2004) suggest that foster children have a generally positive **experience of out-of-home care** and their caregivers (regardless of whether they are placed in a foster home or institutional care), but still retain the hope of reuniting with their birth family. The authors note that the children's satisfaction with out-of-home care depends on a number of factors, such as the possibility of contact with the birth family, positive (pleasant) emotions in relation to foster parents (or professionals in institutions) and experiences in the local community and school. The basic theme that sums up the experiences of children in out-of-home care is ambivalence, that is, the children express two different, yet coexisting messages. The first message is that most children (regardless of the type of placement) love their caregivers and feel close to them. The second message relates to the relationship with their birth family and the importance of regular contacts with them. Most of the children stated that in the future they would prefer to live with their birth family, specifically their mother. Based on these findings, the authors conclude that, in the process of planning interventions, professionals must also build strong relationships with people who are currently caring for the children and encourage and reinforce contacts with the birth family.
- ➔ Messing (2005) conducted a study with children placed in **kinship care** families using the focus group methodology. The study showed that children were satisfied with their placement in kinship care and that extended family is very important to them. Many children in this study expressed a desire to return to their birth family and live with their parents in the future. The children's statements were often accompanied by negative emotions like anger and disappointment in relation to their birth parents. The study also showed that focus group participants empathized with other children and their experiences.
- ➔ Dally and Gilligan (2005) conducted a study primarily focused on the daily life of children aged 13 to 14 years placed in **long-term foster care**. Some of the key themes for this group of children are associated with the importance of regular contact with members of their birth family and the importance of placing siblings together. It was also shown that children placed in long-term foster care generally have a more positive experience of education.
- ➔ Griffin (2004) used grounded theory methodology to study 18 young people who had had **long-term foster care** experience as children (at least four years). Many research participants spoke about relationships with foster parents characterized by hurt, pain and negative emotions, which further reinforced their negative views on relationships. In some placements, where the young people had a positive experience and a sense of family, they estimate that the placement had a therapeutic effect in the context of their relationships with others. They messages they received from foster parents were related to love, belonging, acceptance, importance, and support, and helped them in healing emotional wounds which led to changes in emotions, beliefs, and behavior.

- ➔ A study conducted by Samuels and Pryce (2008) using in-depth interviews with young people **aging out of foster care** identified three basic characteristics of this youth group: premature conferral of adult status (the feeling of being independent their entire life as they were forced to care for themselves because of problematic parenting), growing up without parents (feeling of being different from their peers, questioning their belonging to any family, a sense of self-esteem based on intermittent pathologizing of 'normal' children from 'normal families' by characterizing them as childish and weak, learning how to be their own parent, not experiencing birth parents as real parents and/or real family) and a sense of pride in their independence.
- ➔ Geenen and Power (2007) examined the experiences **of young people transitioning out of foster care** into independent life and identified several key themes including normalizing the foster care experience, importance of relationships and importance of family.
- ➔ Younes and Harp (2007) explored the impact of the fostering process on **birth children** from the so-called dual perspective. They interviewed foster parents and their birth children on this subject. Research results generally indicate that, although foster parents consult their children about the possibility of providing foster care, the final decision is made by the parents. Foster care alters the relationship between parent and child, the family structure, the child's personality and worldview. Experience of the fostering process is often 'bitter-sweet' for birth children and presents a challenge for them and their family. The most difficult experience for foster parents and their children is when foster children leave the family. Birth children stress that their experience with fostering helped them become better people, have a greater understanding of the complexities of life and respect their parents more. In regard to their own experience, birth children in this study further emphasized a need for the greater involvement of birth children in the decision about fostering, as well as in the care for foster children. They also point out that birth children must be provided with full and adequate information about foster care (*"tell them that there will be hard days"*). The children also indicated good communication with parents and spending time alone with their parents as important aspects of the process.
- ➔ Poland and Groze (1993, as cited in Children's Services Practice Notes 1996) interviewed foster parents and their **birth children** about their experiences with foster care. Both the children and foster parents agreed that the most demanding aspect of foster care was sharing parental attention and time between birth and foster children. The children also reported that they spent more time away from home since the coming of the foster children and that they had more freedom to make their own decisions, because their parents were preoccupied with the foster child. They also expressed a need for being given more information, and being better prepared for behavior problems of the foster children. Some of the children demonstrated a lack of understanding of the concept of foster care as well as the reason why the foster child was separated from their birth family and did not fully understand why the foster child was living with them. Both the parents and the children agreed that the experience helped them appreciate their family more. The children also reported that the fostering experience helped them learn how to care for children younger than themselves.

When researching foster care, children's opinions should be taken into consideration in the following matters: (Kools 1999; Farmer et al. 2002; Finkelstein, Wamsley and Doreen 2002; Barber and Delfabbro 2004; Singer, Doornenbal and Okma 2004; Stace and Lowe 2009; Olszewski, Burkhart and Bo 2010):

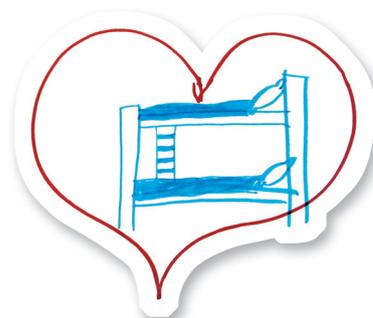
- reasons for the child's placement in foster care and age at the time of placement
- first impressions of foster parents and foster care
- foster parent support and supervision in the key areas of a child's life
- a support system for the child and foster parents
- the impact of personal traits (of the child and foster parents) on relationships
- quality of communication between the child and foster parents
- dealing with critical situations and/or incidents
- contact with the birth parents
- relationship of the child/young person with the foster parents and social workers
- assessment of the impact of foster parent training on the quality of care
- sense of security and belonging
- level of satisfaction with the placement
- feeling of being understood
- the child's experience of foster parents' actions
- assessment of the social worker's actions and satisfaction level with the relationship
- consulting with the child about their preferences prior to placement
- child's awareness about their rights in foster care and alternative sources of support
- inclusion (participation) in planning the placement or treatment plan
- sense of accomplishment through their own academic achievements
- level of satisfaction with interpersonal relationships outside of the foster family
- experience of separation from their parents
- perception of care from foster parents and relatives
- perception of the birth family and its problems
- perception of being prepared for independent life.

It can be deduced from these themes that the focus is placed on the experience of the intervention and that the child's perspective also functions as the user perspective in researching foster care from the children's perspective. Most of the cited studies utilize qualitative methodology to collect data on the children's perspective (interviews and focus groups). The participatory approach was an especially effective part of this research approach, but it was utilized in a smaller segment of the cited studies.

1.2 Foster Care of Children

Both the old (Official Gazette 79/07, Article 2) and the new (OG 90/11, Article 2) Foster Care Act define foster care as “a form of care outside the birth family that provides placement and care in a foster family to a child or adult.” It is emphasized that foster care must be carried out in accordance with the fundamental principles of social welfare, as well as specific principles of the family environment, the sustainability of social relationships, inclusion and best interests of the beneficiary (OG 90/11, Article 3). In addition to other significant improvements, the new Foster Care Act defines two categories in the classification of foster care. The categories are: the **needs of placed beneficiaries** (traditional, specialized, urgent and short-term foster care) and the **status of foster caregivers** (non-kinship, kinship and professional foster care) (OG 90/11, Articles 8 to 16). Although the same law governs the foster care of both children and adults, it states that the foster family will provide care either for children or adults, with the exception of cases when there is a need for placing together parent and child, siblings, teen parents, or marital/non-marital companions (OG 90/11, Article 24). Accordingly, the law systematically provides specific provisions for foster care of children based on most of the important characteristics of foster care. We are especially interested in the provisions related to the duties of foster caregivers as they also provide information about the “designated” content of this form of care. The general and specific duties of foster caregivers are shown in Table 1 (OG 90/11, Articles 41 and 44).

Comparison of this framework with paragraphs 80 to 100 of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (2010), adopted by the UN General Assembly in November of 2009, shows that the previously described specifics generally comply with these guidelines. However, some aspects of care are not explicitly discussed in the legal text (for example, foster parent and child relationship, treatment of the child by the foster parents, etc.). As a rule, these aspects are not subject to laws and regulations, but rather standards of quality. However, as there are no widely accepted standards of quality of child care in foster families in Croatia, some aspects of this form of care are difficult to evaluate. A survey of standards of some countries (e.g., Ireland) showed that they “prescribe” or designate quality indicators specifically for these essential aspects of care (National Standards for Foster Care 2003).



Synthesizing the various administrative regulations of different countries, Berliner and Fine (2001) report that, when deciding to separate the child from the family and place them in foster care, authorities should evaluate whether a particular foster family allows the child to:

- maintain important interpersonal relationships
- stay connected to their cultural heritage
- have stability and continuity
- feel safe and protected from harm
- meet their medical needs
- meet their mental health needs
- have access to education and other services
- prepare for independent living
- have a placement and service plan that works well and is in their best interest
- be placed in a setting well-matched to their needs.

Table 1 General and specific duties of foster caregivers as the content of foster care

General duties of foster caregivers (Article 41)	Specific duties of foster caregivers for children (Article 44)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • personally prepare and prepare family members for the placement of the beneficiary • participate in the development of the individual change plan before and during the placement of the beneficiary • assist the beneficiary in adapting to the new community • provide the beneficiary with all types of services to the extent specified in the referral • proper care, adequate accommodation, food, clothing, footwear and personal items • nurture and improve the health of beneficiaries, provide primary health care and participate in psychosocial rehabilitation programs • ensure that the beneficiary acquires a vocation and assist in finding suitable employment • prepare the beneficiary for the return to their family, independent living or other placement • follow the instructions of the beneficiary's and caregiver's welfare centre • keep records and documentation of all relevant life conditions of the beneficiary and regularly report to the beneficiary's welfare centre as needed • facilitate and encourage contact with the beneficiary's family • ensure the protection of dignity, personal integrity and confidentiality of the beneficiary's personal data • participate in training at least once a year. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • proper and adequate care, education, housing, food, clothing, footwear, school supplies, personal items and health care • provide school supplies, personal items, appropriate toys, sporting and other equipment • nurture the child's positive attitude towards learning, work and vocational training • assist the child in forming their own identity, encourage the development of skills • involve the child in community life according to their needs and interests • enable and encourage the child's visits with parents and other relatives • all major issues must be resolved in agreement with the child's parents, guardian or legal representative, the institutions of the foster child and the foster parent and the provider of other services.

Pursuant to the above and bearing in mind the indicators of the analysis of foster care in Croatia and the guidelines for its further development (Žižak 2010b), we believe that there is a sufficient range of indicators and information about foster care and that data gathered from the user perspective can be linked to different aspects of foster care described and/or prescribed at the national and/or international level. In addition, the broadest framework for generating and understanding the obtained data was formed by general knowledge of psychosocial needs and developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence (Table 2).

Table 2 Psychosocial needs and developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence (adapted from Keresteš, Brajša Žganec and Žic Grgat 2005).

Common needs of children and adolescents for:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • security and protection • love and belonging • care and respect • support and encouragement. 	
Needs of children (6 to 11 yrs. old) for:	Needs of adolescents (12 to 20 yrs. old) for:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demonstrating their own skills and success • interaction with peers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing independence and autonomy • identity development.
Developmental tasks of childhood:	Developmental tasks of adolescence:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acquire physical skills needed for everyday normal games • learn to get along with peers • form healthy attitudes about themselves as developing organisms • learn about gender roles of women and men • adopt concepts necessary for everyday life • develop a conscience, morality and values • form attitudes toward social groups and institutions • achieve personal independence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • form new and more mature relationships with peers of both sexes • adopt an appropriate gender role • accept their appearance and learn to manage their body • achieve emotional independence of adults • prepare for marriage and family life • adopt the values and ethical system that will guide their behavior • aspire to behave in a socially responsible manner and carry it out.

2 Research Objectives

“The purpose of the research is the creation of conditions for improving the quality of foster care in Croatia through appropriately informing, preparing and including all parties, especially children.”

➔ The purpose of this research:

is directly related to developing new knowledge needed to improve the quality of foster care of children. Indirectly, the scope of the research is the creation of conditions for improving the quality of foster care in Croatia through appropriately informing, preparing and including all parties, especially children (both foster children and birth² children of foster parents), in the process of separation of the child from the birth family, placement in the foster family and alignment of life in the foster family with the rights and needs of children.

➔ General research objective:

researching and understanding foster care from the perspective of foster children and birth children of foster parents, as well as adults with experience of living in foster care as children, i.e. exploring and understanding the user perspective.

➔ Specific research objectives:

- researching the experience and understanding of **reasons for separation** from the birth family and placement in foster care from the user perspective
- researching the **experience and perception of status of foster children**/adolescents
- researching the **experience and perception of status** of foster children of the group of children and adolescents **displaced from inadequate foster care and placed in a children's home**
- researching the experience and understanding of reasons for placement in foster care **from the perspective of birth children of foster parents**
- researching the experience and understanding of foster care from the perspective of adults with **experience of living in foster care as children**.

² In this research, it is vital to examine and describe how birth children of foster parents experience foster care from their specific positions. Primarily because their perspective is actually the children's perspective on foster care, and the starting hypothesis of this research is that precisely this perspective remains unexplored. On the other hand, the participatory nature of the research allows for the children's perspective to be studied and described as a multi-layered experience of foster care, seen from different positions and statuses that the children presently have or had in the past (childhood experiences of adults).

3

Research Methodology

“Children’s perspectives and experiences are often absent from the models and understanding of social phenomena, therefore child’s participation must be encouraged in building knowledge and developing new theories and practices.”



3.1 Methodological Framework

Because of the specific qualities of this research with children, based on principles of the qualitative approach, a description of the methodological framework requires that we first explain and clarify the importance of child participation in research, as well as the essential ethical principles in such research, before defining the sample and method of research.

3.1.1 Child participation in research

Often, decisions are made about children in out-of-home care based solely on information provided by adults, which is lacking at best in so far as adults cannot think, feel and perceive life like children do (Stephenson, Gourley and Miles 2004). The authors argue that, unless adults take into account children's opinions and views of certain situations, the decisions that they make are more likely to have a negative impact on children. They also stress that the information provided by children should be used in conjunction with information provided by adults. Child participation is much more present in "standard systems" that include children and young people, such as education, than with children and young people in the welfare³ or juvenile justice system. Burke (2010) notes a lack of child participation in certain areas, such as immigration services, child protection and the juvenile justice system. The author argues that participation is stifled by adult-centered decision-making processes in these systems. Qualitative research with children in out-of-home care showed that there are still considerable challenges in involving children in decision making (Leeson 2007, as cited in Burke 2010). Many of the children in the research described feeling "overwhelmingly helpless" due to not being involved in decision making. Their experience of what the author calls "corporate parenting"⁴ was impersonal and system-oriented, rather than child-centered. Although children had positive views of professionals, attempts to talk about their feelings were often met with a lack of understanding from key adults.

³ During the implementation of this research, a new Social Welfare Act (OG 57/11) was passed in Croatia, which under Article 33 provides that "The user of social welfare has the right to participate in the assessment of their situation and needs and decision on receiving necessary services and timely obtain all the information needed for decision making and consent to the service, including the risk of injury or damage, description, objectives and benefits of proposed services, as well as information about other available services and other information relevant to the provision of services (...) The child, according to their age and maturity, as well as the adult unfit for work, in accordance with their abilities, have the right to participate and give their opinion in all proceedings in which decisions are made about their rights."

⁴ 'Corporate parenting' is a term used to describe the responsibility of local authorities towards children and young people in out-of-home care. This legal responsibility was given to local authorities by the Children Act of 1989 and the Children Act of 2004 in Great Britain (<http://www.warrington.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/supportforfamilies/parentingsupport/corpparenting.aspx>).

Children's perspectives and experiences are often absent from the models and understanding of social phenomena. Child participation must be encouraged in building knowledge and developing new theories and practices. In this sense, qualitative research, and participatory research in particular, is considered to be a good method of encouraging child participation (Mishna, Antle and Regehr 2004). Regarding the importance of active child participation in research, Czymoniewicz-Klippel (2009) argues that modern scholars have accepted the right of children to be research collaborators and are now more focused on exploring to what extent and in what ways children can and should be involved in research.

Children can be included in research in at least two ways: as **active participants** (those who share their experiences and perceptions and help in creating new knowledge) and as **researchers** (those who initiate or fully participate in all aspects of the research process) (Clark 2004). Both are examples of participatory research, but the role and degree of involvement of children is different.

Since children cannot be viewed as one homogenous group, it is clear that some children are more able and willing to engage in research than others. Hart (1992) lists some factors affecting children's ability to participate: social and emotional development, ability of expression, social class variations and different participation opportunities for boys and girls (especially in developing countries). Taking into account the specific qualities, competencies and potential of each child, as well as their free will to decide whether, when and in what way to participate, we can define the "individual continuum of participation" (Žižak 2010c) where each child independently decides to what extent and in what way to participate. In this respect, we can describe a continuous process of evaluation, negotiation and consultation between professionals/researchers and individual children, that is to say a non-hierarchical approach to participation.

3.1.2

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues related to research, especially participatory research with children, are numerous and complex. Mishna, Antle and Regehr (2004) state that the main ethical objectives of research with children are to protect their rights, freedoms, safety, and dignity and that the quest for understanding (information) must never be a higher priority than care for children. The key ethical issues in this research were related to: voluntary decision and informed consent to participate in research, physical and psychological safety of research participants, protection of privacy, information confidentiality and access to research results.

➔ Voluntary decision and consent to participate in research

Obtaining informed consent is considered to be an unfinished and ongoing process that continues throughout the entire research process (Mason 1996; Renold et al. 2000). In this respect, consent provided by the participants allowed for each individual participant to decide the method and extent of participation in research. All research participants were informed about all areas of research related to their direct participation and relevant for their decision to participate in the study.

Participants were given relevant and concise information about the subject and purpose of the research, information confidentiality and privacy, and the use and presentation of data obtained through the research. These considerations ensured informed consent from all research participants.

The process of obtaining consent for the participation of children in the research included several steps. It started with seeking consent in writing at the level of decision-makers (Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, local social welfare centers and directors of children's homes), and continued with obtaining verbal consent of the guardians (in cases where the legal guardians were professionals from centers for social welfare) and written consent of the guardians (in cases where they were the birth parents of a child or foster parents). The most direct consent for participation was obtained in writing from children and adults who participated in the research.

All participants had the option of refusing to participate, as well as withdrawing from the study at any point without elaborating their reasons for withdrawal. Consequently, it is important to stress that all of the participants repeatedly consented to and actively participated in the entire process of this research.

➔ Physical and psychological safety of research participants

Because most of the participants in this research are children, particular attention was given to the safety (physical and psychological) of participants during research. Interviews with children were conducted in their own home (residence or institution). The final decision about the interview setting was made with each child individually, respecting their right to privacy and safety during the interview. Interviews were conducted by social pedagogues with experience in interviewing children and adults. The interviews were preceded by clear instructions on the interview process (information about the purpose and objective of the research, information about the subject and content of the interview), as well as instructions that withdrawal is possible at any time.

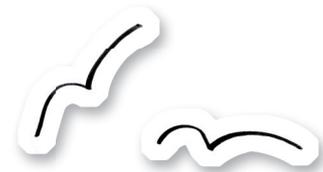
→ Protection of privacy and information confidentiality

The collected data was analyzed as a whole within participant groups, while participant names, places of birth and places of residence were not mentioned. Information about their families, friends and other persons mentioned in the interviews was protected in the same way. Verbatim interview transcripts remain with the research team and will not be available to anyone else in their entirety. Summarized and interpreted data from the interviews will be delivered to the client who commissioned the research. Permission will be obtained from the UNICEF Office for Croatia prior to the publication of research results in professional and scientific publications.

→ Access to research results

Following each dialogue with a particular child/adult, the interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcript of **their own** interview was made available for review to each participant. Participants were able to independently choose how they wished to participate in further interpretation of the data and formulation of recommendations based on the data. This option was offered to all participants and 19 (38%) of them accepted, in accordance with their abilities and needs. These participants contributed to the research as equal partners through active participation, thus ensuring the ethical presentation of results and participative conclusions (Clark 2004).

3.2 Research Participants



The key participants in this research are children (foster children and birth children of foster parents) and adults with experience of living in foster care as children. They formed a very heterogeneous group of participants who had a lot of knowledge and experience on the subject of the research. Consequently, they can be viewed as a relevant sample, or “information-rich” sample as described by Patton (2002).

This selection complies with general principles of participant selection in qualitative research, where a sample of participants usually refers to a deliberately chosen and relatively small number of participants that provide detailed information (Ajduković 2008). In other words, participants in qualitative research are selected according to their knowledge of the research subject matter.

Heterogeneity of participants refers to the following characteristics: age, gender, psychosocial maturity, place of residence (urban or rural area), status (foster child/adolescent, birth child of foster parents, child/adolescent in a children’s home with previous experience of living in foster care, adult with experience of living in foster care as a child), time spent in foster care, experiences of different types of out-of-home placement, etc. Given the mentioned heterogeneity of the participants, the primary criterion for participant selection followed Patton’s “**maximum variation sampling**” principle (1990, as cited in Hoepfl 1997) that aims to capture a variety of experiences in order to describe the research scope and ascertain similarities and differences in participants’ experiences. Table 3 provides a general outline of the structure of research participants. A more detailed description of research participants from different groups is provided in the chapter on research results.

Table 3 General outline of the structure of research participants

Participant groups	Number	Features of the participants	Features of the environment
Foster children aged 10 to 12 years	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> gender: both (5 + 5) experience in foster care: no less than 6 months. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> urban and rural foster care three counties were selected according to the professionals’ degree of satisfaction with the development of foster care (Žižak 2010b): 1) Koprivnica-Križevci County (satisfied) 2) Osijek-Baranja County (somewhat satisfied) 3) Primorje-Gorski Kotar County (not satisfied).
Foster adolescents aged 15 to 17 years	10		
Birth children of foster parents	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> gender: both (5 + 5) age: 10 to 12 years (5) and 15 to 17 years (5) experience of a birth child in a family providing foster care: no less than 1 year. 	
Children/adolescents placed in a children’s home after living in foster care	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> age: 10 to 17 years gender: both (5 + 5) experience of foster care: no less than 6 months, no more than 1 year prior to placement in a children’s home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all children’s homes in which documentation analysis was performed⁵ and children’s homes located in selected counties.
Adults with experience of living in foster care as children	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no less than 5 and no more than 15 years since leaving foster care. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> all voluntary respondents to an advertisement who met the mentioned requirements.

⁵ In parallel with this research, a survey was conducted into the state of a segment of out-of-home care for children entitled “An analysis of documentation about out-of-home care for children aged 0 to 3 years placed in children’s homes and the professionals’ criteria in the decision-making process on the type of out-of-home placement for children aged 0 to 3 years” that included 8 child care institutions (Lovran Children’s Home, Osijek CH, Split CH, Zagreb CH, Caritas, Carmelites, SOS Children’s Village Ladmirevci and SOS Lekenik).

3.3 Data Collection Methods

In order to achieve its purpose and objectives, the research was based on **direct data collection** from research participants (through interviews). The key method in investigating the user perspective is the method of dialogue, namely the semi-structured interview technique. Drafts of semi-structured interviews for each participant group can be found in the Appendix (Chapter 8).

When a research project involves children, the researchers must carefully prepare for all situations and possible consequences. This especially applies to participatory research projects, such as this one, where a child must actively and willingly participate in multiple stages of the research. Identifying and understanding the personal perspective of a participant is never a simple task, particularly with children who are vulnerable and exposed to a number of risks in their surroundings, their family especially, most commonly from an early age. Consequently, the study of a child's personal perspective, which includes sharing personal, often difficult and intimate, experiences, events, memories and feelings, must be planned and conducted in a highly professional and sensitive manner so as not to cause additional and repeated victimization of the child in different areas or intensify possible distrust of adults and the system. This aspect of research is somewhat more elusive. Because it is more difficult to approach and grasp, invades the participant's privacy and creates a different relationship between researcher and participant, this perspective is poorly understood. All these sensitive aspects of research should be covered in preparation (and implementation) of research, with respect for the rights of children, not only for protection, but also participation, and particular respect for ethical principles of research with children (Ajduković and Kolesarić 2003). This research complied with every principle, especially on the subject of informing participants about the objective and purpose of research, roles of participants and researchers, freedom of choice and voluntary consent, possibility of withdrawal, anonymity and seeking consent. These circumstances were made clear in the introductory or informational talk with each child. The interview process included expertise and sensitivity in communication and establishing a relationship of trust.

A very large amount of data was collected from the participants using these methods. Table 4 shows the amount of data collected in interviews from each participant group.



Table 4 The amount of data collected in interviews from each participant group

Participants	Number of pages (Times New Roman font, font size 12 pt, single-spaced)
Foster children	123
Foster adolescents	130
Children and adolescents placed in a children's home following inadequate foster care	141
Adults with experience of living in foster care as children	148
Birth children of foster parents	103
TOTAL	645

3.3.1

A review of the data collection process and the experience of conditions in which the data was collected

In relation to the interviews conducted with children, young people and adults with previous experience with foster care, it is important to describe the process of collecting data through interviews, as well as the conditions and experience of conditions in which the data was collected by the interviewers. The former will be described through four aspects:

- 1 preparatory work for the interviews** (forming a sample and laying the groundwork)
- 2 implementation of the interviews** (spatial and technical requirements and relational aspects of the interview implementation)
- 3 giving back the interviews to the participants, review and revision**
- 4 reflection after the completion of the process of data collection.**

The description of the conditions and experience of conditions in which the data was collected, was obtained from the researchers' (interviewers') field notes and notes of the reflexive focus group with interviewers after the interviews were conducted.

➔ 1 Preparatory work for the interviews

Forming a sample

In order to find participants meeting the criteria specified in the research draft, the researchers initially contacted eight centers for social welfare (Crikvenica, Opatija, Rijeka, Krk, Križevci, Koprivnica, Osijek and Beli Manastir) and five children's homes (Zagreb, Koprivnica, SOS Lekenik and Ladimirevci, Selce and Novi Vinodolski). Initial contact was made through a telephone conversation in which the purpose of research was explained and the researchers introduced. After the telephone conversation, the institutions were sent two official letters: the first was intended for the directors of the institutions and contained a summary of the project and approval from the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, while the second was intended for foster care team members (social workers in institutions) and requested specific data on foster families (as well as children placed in children's homes after living in foster care). The institutions provided the requested data, following which the researchers contacted individual foster families and arranged interviews with the children.

Difficulties encountered at this stage of forming the sample were associated with the need for multiple contacts between children's homes, social welfare centers, foster parents, researchers and the Ministry. In this respect, the process of communication with institutions was more time-consuming than anticipated and required more initial effort aimed at the clarification of the research concept, information about the consent of the relevant Ministry, etc. It should also be noted that cooperation was successful with all of the institutions (centers and homes) and that the professionals provided the requested information in a relatively short time period. However, it is equally important to note that the data forwarded from some centers was incomplete and/or inaccurate⁶, indicating a question of records on foster families being accurate and up to date.

With regard to interviewing adults with experience in foster care, an advertisement was designed together with the UNICEF Office, which invited adults with experience in foster care to participate in the research. At first, the ad was placed only on the UNICEF website and Facebook group. Due to unsatisfactory response to the ad placed in UNICEF electronic media, it was deemed necessary to explore new strategies of finding participants for the group of adults with experience in foster care. Only two individuals answered the ad on UNICEF's Facebook profile and neither one met the research criteria. The ensuing search for research participants for this subsample utilized personal and professional acquaintances of the research team members and employees of UNICEF, as well as the publication of advertisements in local papers. These methods yielded nine participants. One individual was located through a newspaper article and contacted by one of the researchers. Finding adults with the experience of living in foster care as children proved to be the most challenging aspect of forming the research sample and required the most time and human resources.

⁶ Through direct contact with foster families, it was determined that some families did not have foster children of the required age or that inaccurate names were provided for the children, etc.

Laying the groundwork

Once the foster families' information and contacts were obtained from relevant centers, selected foster families (based on age and gender of the foster child or age and gender of birth children) were contacted by the interviewers via telephone. The interviewers explained the concept and purpose of the research to foster parents so they could convey it to the children and ask whether they wanted to participate in the research. Based on the child's general consent, the interviewers went out in the field to visit the families.

Given that the centers did not specifically inform foster parents that their contact information had been forwarded to the research team, in some cases it was necessary to expend additional effort to establish a trusting relationship with the foster parents. In hindsight, it seems important for future research that contacts with foster parents be planned more attentively. One possible solution would be for the foster families to be initially contacted by the legally responsible center and prepared for the researcher's call.

After the first several interviews were conducted, it became clear that visiting the foster families actually meant immersing in their private everyday life and could cause certain uneasiness, even stress. Visiting the family caused a certain broadening of the research process, but sometimes also a hindrance. For example, the foster parents often distracted the interviewers by needing to share their experiences, opinions and difficulties. Also, in compliance with societal tradition, the interviewers felt the need to bring a small gift for the children (chocolate, cookies, etc.) when visiting the families. On the other hand, foster families often greeted the interviewers with sweets and beverages. Therefore, the field research included the technical aspects of interviewing, but also the "social" side of interaction and dialogue.

As for children living in children's homes, the interviews were arranged with professionals at the homes. In some cases, the children were evidently well prepared by professionals, which manifested through their responsiveness and openness during the conversation and a better rapport with the interviewer.

Interviews with adult research participants were conducted in their homes or private residences, the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, and in one case, the participant's workplace.

The interviewers prepared for field research mostly by familiarizing themselves with a draft of the interview questions for individual participant groups. The entire research team participated in the initial preparation, which consisted of group reading and discussion of issues and provided general guidelines for talking to children and adolescents. Each interviewer also prepared individually for interviews through further study of the questions. Another aspect of the interview preparatory work included the preparation of technical equipment, such as dictaphones and other recording devices. Proper operation and good working order of the devices was verified for this purpose.

➔ 2 Implementation of the interviews

Spatial and technical requirements

The implementation of the interviews was influenced to a certain extent by the spatial and technical requirements. Specifically, as the interviews mostly took place in private residences of foster parents, they were sometimes conducted in the living room or dining room in the immediate vicinity of other family members, which threatened the privacy of the conversations. Some foster parents also occasionally interjected in the interview, especially in the case of younger or less communicative children, adding to the interview with their comments and interpretations. When the interview took place in a separate room (for example, the child's room), there were fewer interruptions from other individuals, as well as a greater sense of privacy and confidentiality.

There were also minor technical issues associated with non-functioning equipment (e.g., a dictaphone that had stopped taping and a part of the conversation was not recorded), making it necessary for some interviews to be repeated in part. The children were very obliging in these cases and agreed to be re-interviewed.

Relational aspects of the interview implementation

The purpose and ethical principles of the research were carefully explained to foster parents and children before the interviews. Children signed consent forms for research participation prior to the interviews. The interviewers made an effort to have some informal contact with the child and foster family members in order to establish an initial rapport with the child. In some families, where there was more than one foster child, the interviewers experienced some discomfort and a need to clarify why they were not interviewing all of the children. In some families, foster parents insisted that more children be interviewed (e.g., two sisters) so that a particular child would not feel neglected.

➔ 3 Giving back the interviews to participants for review and revision

After implementation, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and returned to the participants for review and **final approval** for the use of the interviews in the research. For that reason, the interviewers revisited the institution or family where the children were placed, reviewed the interview with the child and revised it according to the child's needs and wishes. In three cases the interviews were returned via email. E-mail proved to be a good method of communication with adolescents as they find it acceptable and familiar.

Most of the participants read their interview in its entirety and had no further comments. It was noted that participants exhibited a certain sense of satisfaction, pride and importance because they were asked to review their interview. This kind of positive reaction from the children provides a good basis for further participatory research with children.

➔ 4 Reflection after the completion of the process of data collection

As previously mentioned, after the interviews were completed, a reflexive focus group including all of the research team members was organized with the purpose of sharing and analyzing experiences. A summary of the discussion in the focus group identified specific themes that can be classified into two groups: **new knowledge and experience of the researchers on a personal level** and **raising awareness of important issues from the perspective of participants**.

New knowledge and experience of the researchers on a personal level included:

- experience of conducting research in a natural family environment
- practical experience of conducting interviews in different groups of participants (in terms of adjusting to different participants and conducting the entire interview process, from establishing contact to completing the interview)
- dealing with difficult situations in interviews and distressing participants' life stories
- the importance of exploring and researching the user perspective (in terms of new knowledge and user empowerment through research participation)
- awareness that this experience will assist the advancement of models of participatory work with children in terms of their greater involvement, empowerment, and more opportunities to acknowledge the user perspective
- possibility of creating a reference point (or media, such as a Facebook profile) that participants can contact if they need assistance and further information or if they wish to comment on something.

Raising awareness of important issues from the perspective of participants was related to:

- children's lack of information about the separation and placement process
- inadequate and insufficient contact between children and legally responsible social workers
- lack of guidance, support and supervision for foster parents
- money as a relatively frequent theme in interviews and informal conversations with foster parents (money as a motive for fostering, a lack of financial resources for foster parents, etc.).



3.4 Data Analysis Methods

Interview transcripts, read and approved by research participants, represent data processed according to qualitative research principles. The first step for the research team was to read the interviews classified by participant groups (subsamples) and agree on the most appropriate data analysis method. Our starting point was the thematic analysis method⁷ (Braun and Clarke 2006). A theme is a pattern within the data set that can generally be identified in two ways: inductively and deductively. We decided to utilize the deductive (theoretical) approach, whereby a theme is identified according to the theoretical or analytical interest of the researcher. This form of thematic analysis tends to provide a less detailed description of the data overall, but rather a detailed analysis of certain aspects of the data.

Thematic analysis can also be semantic or latent. In semantic thematic analysis, the themes are defined within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, meaning that the analyst is not looking for anything ‘beyond’ what can be found in the data. In latent thematic analysis, the primary focus is on interpretation. In accordance with the title and objectives of the research, the latent and semantic approaches were both utilized and the user perspective was conveyed in the literal sense, just as often as interpreted. The semantic level had a dual purpose: on one hand to literally convey the user perspective, and on the other to provide information necessary to verify the interpretation.

Two stages of data analysis were determined.

The **first stage** began with forming a framework for the interpretation of data through eight themes. The themes were determined based on the researchers’ insights into the interviews, in accordance with the conceptual framework and objectives of the research.

The identified themes are as follows:

- 1 understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family
- 2 understanding of foster care as a form of care
- 3 experience of foster child status
- 4 characteristics of experience
- 5 participation in decision making
- 6 the birth family from the children’s perspective
- 7 the foster family from the children’s perspective
- 8 the children’s recommendations.

Space was also allowed for new themes which proved important from the perspective of participants in individual subsamples.

⁷ Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis 1998, as cited in Braun and Clarke 2006).

The qualitative analysis process of the interviews for each separate participant subsample included the following analytical steps: (1) reading the interview in its entirety, (2) defining codes, (3) identifying codes for each participant individually, (4) defining categories at the level of each separate subsample, (5) interpreting obtained results for each participant subsample, according to the proposed thematic framework and corroborating categories and codes with literal quotes from participants' statements.

In the **second stage**, data was analyzed as follows: (1) reading and summarizing data from the first stage of analysis for each individual theme and participant subset, (2) connecting the key features of themes for all participant subsets and defining categories within each theme, (3) interpretation and formulation of conclusions and guidelines.

4

Overview of Research Results

“If I could, I would be a foster parent... if these children are unhappy and have no family of their own, so they don't have to wait in a children's home for someone to take them in... It's easier for me because I'm in foster care – I know how to treat another child!”



4.1 Data Analysis for Individual Participant Subsamples within the Given Framework

The purpose of data analysis within the given framework for each participant group individually is related to comprehensive presentation and description of the specific messages of research participants associated with understanding foster care from the perspective of children.

Results of the analysis for each participant group are presented within the same framework and in the same manner. The characteristics of each group of participants (subsample) are provided first, followed by the results of interpretation within the given framework and a summary description of key messages for interpretation of the specific subsample. The analysis of results for each participant subsample is presented in the following order:

4.1.1 Foster children

4.1.2 Foster adolescents

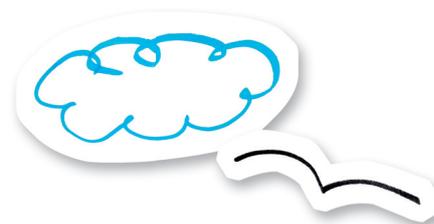
4.1.3 Children and adolescents placed in a children's home following inadequate foster care

4.1.4 Birth children of foster parents

4.1.5 Adults with experience of living in foster care as children.

The chapters that present the research results are written in a style characteristic for qualitative research results that, as a rule, abounds in literal statements of the participants. In this regard, it should be noted that the direct statements of research participants are written in italics. The statements given here are literal and not placed in quotation marks, while consecutive statements from and two or more participants are separated with a semi-colon (;).

4.1.1 Foster children



➔ Description of participants

The foster children subsample includes 10 participants, five boys and five girls placed in the Rijeka, Križevci, Koprivnica, Osijek and Beli Manastir areas. The age of the children ranges from 10 to 13 years, while the average age is 11.4. With regard to the type of foster care, one girl is placed in kinship foster care (grandparents). Four of the participants are placed together with their siblings, one participant's brother had previously lived in the same foster family, while one participant's brother had also previously lived in the same family, but is currently placed in a children's home. Brothers of two of the participants are placed in other foster families. Two of the children have had negative experiences in previous foster placement (abuse in a foster family). Prior to current placement, one child had previously lived in two foster families, one in a children's home and one both in a foster family and a children's home. The average duration of stay in the current foster family is 4.35 years (range from one to eight years). The age of placement in the current foster family is very different and ranges from three to 11 years (average 6.65), which undoubtedly affected the children's experience and perception of foster care.

The situation with the children's birth families is also very varied. Some of the children have two living parents, and most of them several siblings. Additionally, they have occasional contact with some family members, but most have relatively regular contact with at least one parent and siblings. Two of the children have practically no contact with their birth family (last visit six months ago, no calls). Some children know several members of their extended family (aunt, uncle, grandfather) and have occasional contact with them. Table 5 gives an overview of some characteristics of participants from the foster children subsample.

Table 5 Overview of some participant characteristics (foster children)

Boys	5
Girls	5
Age (average)	11.4
Children placed with siblings	4
Children whose siblings have been placed in a different foster family	2
Previous negative experiences in foster care	2
Duration of stay in current foster family (average)	4.35
Age of placement in the current foster family (average)	6.65

➔ 1 Understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family

Most of the foster children who participated in this research are able to **understand the reason** why they were separated from their birth family (eight out of 10) and express **acceptance of this decision**, with regard to the prevailing circumstances in their family before and during separation. They often characterize the situation in their family as difficult even after placement. Reasons for separation include: mother or father abandoning the family, illness of mother/father, child neglect by the mother/father, discord and violence in the family, sociopathological phenomena such as alcoholism and unemployment, poverty, etc. Statements of some of the children illustrate the aforementioned categories: *My dad hit my sister, we had no rules, chores or discipline...; Our mother left us and then our father too.; Dad was violent to mom and me and I misbehaved...; We were cold and hungry all the time, we ate newspaper.*

Two of the children discuss problems in their families, but appear not to understand why they were displaced. One of them cites the divorce of his parents as the reason, while the other states that he does not know the cause or reason for his separation from the family. Also, the boy that describes his father abusing his brother does not understand why he was separated from the family *when my father didn't abuse me, only my brother.*

Most of the children find it difficult to talk about this period and the reasons why they had to be placed in foster care or a children's home. They speak about being apart from their family with sadness. When they remember their childhood in their own family, the memories are often pleasant (without much detail). With regard to separation from their birth family and placement in foster care/children's home, especially from families with more children, the participants speak on the subject with emotional difficulty, but sometime also rationally, e.g. *P. went to...; J. was placed in... They couldn't find a family that could take all of us.* Even today, after being apart from their family for years, some of the children cry when they talk about these memories. This clearly indicates strong feelings of separation, loss and sadness, as well as the fact that this subject is rarely talked about and mostly avoided (except when they occasionally have to talk to the foster parents about how bad their family situation was) and not discussed even with professionals.

Sometimes the children's knowledge about separation from their family is hearsay (their aunt, brother/sister told them) because they were too young or under great emotional stress (*I just cried...*) and it can be inferred that they heard the "story" from others.

➔ 2 Understanding of foster care as a form of care

Conversations with children provided insight into their comprehension of foster care, which is the form of care that they are currently in. We believe theirs to be an important perspective because, presumably, the level of the children's satisfaction with their relationship with their foster parents and other people, as the well as their view of themselves depends, not only on specific experiences of foster care, but also on the understanding of the concept of foster care and their own status.

Generally, it is possible to conclude that children **understand the concept** of foster care, that they have their own idea of foster care and that foster care is usually perceived through the perspective of **care, attention, support and concern for children without their own family**. There are several perspectives/opinions no different than the previously mentioned, but also specific because they attempt to define the function of the foster family more precisely. One boy perceives it through responsibility (*It's a big commitment – they have to feed him, dress him, educate him, take care of hygiene.*), one girl through the temporary nature of foster care (*I'm here only temporarily until I turn 18...*), some children through reciprocity (*They take care of you and you have to behave!; I won't be a low-life, I'll be a good man so I can stay with my foster family...*), one boy talks about gratitude (*...I'd tell him he had to be grateful to the foster parents for taking him in.*) and one boy describes his happiness *about having a family to take care of him like a real family.*

Although children's specific experiences may be somewhat different, the overall perspective on foster care of children participating in this research is almost uniform (care for children without families). There is a clear **preference of foster care to institutional care**, both in children with previous negative experiences in foster care and in children who previously lived in a children's home, as well as those who were placed directly in their foster family. All of the children state that if they were charged with placing a child in out-of-home care, or if they could make the decision for themselves again, they would always prefer a foster family precisely because it is a family (*Why would I pick a foster family before a children's home? So (the child) can feel like he has a real family and not isolated.*). Children's perceptions of children's homes are mostly negative. They view the homes as gloomy places, full of children, lacking personal freedom, etc. (*...there's not a lot of kids here, it's better, I don't like when it's crowded...; ...I didn't really like it there (meaning the home)... it was boring...*). This knowledge seems important because it reveals the perspective of children who are the beneficiaries of this type of care. It is crucial to see and understand their perspective, so that future decisions can be based on these findings and children be less affected by the already difficult situation of separation and life away from their birth family. However, the children also had specific suggestions (further discussed in the recommendations) on how to better design and implement the entire process.

➔ 3 Experience of foster child status

From the interviews with the children, it was possible to ascertain how they perceive their own position in the foster family, as seen in relation to the foster parents, their birth children, neighbors, classmates, etc. This experience differs depending on several factors. In terms of **kinship foster care** (a girl placed with her grandfather together with her sisters), the children **do not have an experience of being in foster care**. This term does not apply to them in their perception of their own status.

Most foster children who are not in kinship foster care express **satisfaction** with their status and describe it through feelings of **acceptance** and **inclusion** in everyday activities and family life (*...I always watch TV with grandma A., I talk to auntie and uncle when I have a problem, they always give me good advice on how to fix something, me and T. study together a lot and go to school and play board games sometimes, I hang out with V. the most, we play cards and I talk with V. a lot, she plays music...*). They describe similar experiences in school and with friends in their neighborhood (*...well, they accepted me right away and there were no problems, everything went smoothly...*). They feel **equal** to other members of the immediate (*Auntie treated us the same as her birth kids. She still does; I think my life isn't that different from other children. It's like family.; They take care of us like their own children. And our foster parents take better care of us because we're not theirs, so they won't have problems...*) and sometimes extended family (*...I hang out with auntie's granddaughters...*).

However, beyond this perspective (let us call it external/social), almost every participant exhibits another, which we labeled the internal or **emotional perspective of the child**. On this level, children talk about the **experience of being different** from children who live with their birth families and the experience of being different (stigmatized) from an early age (*...no one at all wanted to play with me in kindergarten. Because I'm in foster care and they're not...; And then nobody wanted to hang out with me except this one girl...*). One boy states: *I don't know if auntie loves me like her own kids?* Another example: *When we have a parent-teacher conference and I see that their parents come and auntie comes for me, I feel kind of weird, like, I don't know...* However, a theme that tends to occur often on this level is the experience that being accepted and staying in the foster family is **conditional**. Some children state: *staying in the family has to be earned or if I don't behave, I'll have to go home; they don't want to be a low-life so they can stay in their foster family*. Some children also exhibit feelings of gratitude (*I'm really honored that they took me in.*).

One boy cannot come to terms with being in foster care, that is away from his family, and expresses sadness and refusal of the situation.

→ 4 Characteristics of experience

Since this topic is very similar to the previous one, the experiences generally revolve around similar, but also some specific themes, such as different experiences of previous foster families (negative) in relation to the current (positive). Here are some statements that illustrate the point: *Because we were bored there. They beat us all the time... so...; Auntie beat us, we weren't allowed to play...* Some children talk about the **structure of life** in foster care, their daily schedule and routines and one girl demonstrates a very positive attitude towards a structured everyday life (*rules, chores and discipline*), while one boy talks about his difficulties with adhering to the relatively strict rules in the family (the boy is hyperactive and has major issues with discipline).

Some children cite very specific experiences that could be useful for planning and implementation of this type of care. For example, one boy talks about the **advantages of gradual inclusion in the foster family** (initially he stayed with them during school breaks, and was then permanently placed after getting acquainted, adapting, etc.).

One boy reports his **happiness and satisfaction** with the foster family where he is completely included in all family activities, has common interests with each family member and perceives the family as his real family (*I was so happy to have a family that would take care of me like a real family!; ...I love auntie so much, I always say she's the best...*).

→ 5 Participation in decision making

In this case, participation in decision making is related to the child's life in foster care. Children who talk about this subject, generally feel **included and respected in the family** and have an experience of equal (to other children in the family) **participation indecision making**. The former mostly applies to everyday matters, which is understandable due to the age of the participants, while the so-called major decisions are made by adults (*What kind of things do you have a say in? Studying, fun, games... What things don't you have a say in? Things that adults decide...*). For the most part, children participate in decisions about leisure activities, food, going on trips, etc. and one boy reports that the foster parents frequently ask about his feelings and opinions (*Foster parents often ask how I feel and what I think, and I always tell them.*). Only one boy reports limited participation in decision making and concludes that this is a result of problems that he causes.

→ 6 The birth family from the children's perspective

Birth families of foster children were discussed previously, however, we would like to further elaborate some circumstances mentioned by foster children in relation to their families. Although contact with birth family members ranges from regular to absent, children are **reluctant to talk about their birth family** because it **reminds them of the difficult life circumstances that resulted in their separation from the family**, but also their current situation, which is not acceptable to most of the children. Most of the children are in contact with one parent and siblings and sometimes with members of the extended family (aunt). Some of the children are happy about the visits and look forward to them, while others display emotional indifference or ambivalence towards these contacts and individuals (relatives). Siblings that are placed in a foster family or area together and have regular contact, plan their future together, often with the foster family. Two of the children exhibit real **longing for the birth family**, although contact is almost non-existent (for example, last contact took place six months ago), while some children express ambivalence, for example, *I might want to meet with them*. Also, the experience of belonging to the birth family is evident, regardless of the conditions and possibilities, so one child prefers living with the mother and brother, although they live in difficult conditions. One boy explicitly states that it is important to him to know his birth family (extended, as well as immediate) because this most likely satisfies his need for belonging or, as he phrases it, *so I can know who my aunt and uncle are, so I'm not alone*. With one of the children, there is a correlation between the experience of the birth family and that of the foster family.

→ 7 The foster family from the children's perspective

The experience of the foster family from the perspective of foster children can provide valuable information about this type of placement and thusly contribute to the improvement of this form of care for children without adequate parental care. The children discuss this subject through several aspects: experiential, level of satisfaction and benefits.

The experiential level is evident in the answers of children who **perceive the foster family as their own**. This is the case with kinship foster care, but also several other cases where children talk about the foster family being *like a real family*, or even better because *a regular family can't give you everything like a foster family*.

Children often speak about their **satisfaction** (and even happiness) with their current placement, they are pleased with the present situation, would not change anything and plan to remain with the family even after they turn 18, that is to say, they envision their future life with the foster family (*...I talked to auntie about having a big house when I grow up and they can live with me...*).

The children frequently talk, directly or indirectly, about **benefits** of being placed in a foster family. These include both material and non-material support/benefits, for example: *you have hobbies, everything is free, food, education, help, support; rules, chores, discipline, homework comes first, work habits; help, support, adopting habits; better grades and behavior; regular meals, cleanliness, neatness, regular visits to the school, caring for me...; I'm better off, auntie N. is a better cook, she cooks regularly, she doesn't drink, she's clean and neat, she regularly checks in with my school and goes to parent-teacher conferences, she makes sure I'm clean, she takes care of me, hygiene, food, studying; I have more friends here... I'm not yelled at as much, it's clean. There... we couldn't wash up, we had no bathroom, no way to keep clean. It's much better here, I have everything, my own closet. We had nothing there.*

➔ 8 The children's recommendations

When talking about themselves and their life experiences, participants occasionally felt the need (sometimes prompted by the interviewers) to say something about their own thoughts, ideas and suggestions on what could be done better or differently to help children and everyone else involved to feel better and deal better with difficult situations, but also everyday life. We classified these, as we called them, participants' recommendations into several categories, depending on whom they are addressed to and who might hear and acknowledge them. Some of these messages **are addressed to foster family members**, but most of them are addressed **to workers/professionals in social welfare centers**. Some are related to the separation and placement/coming to the foster family situations and others to the entire course of the child's/family's life.

We divided the aforementioned into recommendations addressed to foster parents and to professionals in social welfare centers, as follows:

Children suggest that **foster parents** should have the following **characteristics**: reasonable, caring, respectful of children's opinions, not abusive, supportive... (for example, *Foster parents have to be nice, look after the kids, take care of them, because if they don't, the kids aren't happy...; They should be reasonable with the children... if I make a suggestion, they should consider it, or if they get in an argument, they shouldn't blame the children...*)

Based on the intended recipient, they have several recommendations **for social welfare centers**:

- In relation to foster parents: **higher level of control and more frequent supervision of foster parents**, so there would be no changes of placement due to neglect or abuse (e.g., *I would tell the social workers to visit kids more often...; It would be good if professionals and social workers could visit kids more often and talk to them to find out what life is like for them in the family...*).

- In relation to children: **ask children** about their opinions and feelings (...*well, when they put me... I didn't care where they put me, they put me...* (crying)... *Like it was all the same to me... They should ask children how they feel.; Listen to the children with understanding!*) and **respect** their suggestions, **prepare** the children for separation and **acquaint** them with their new foster family prior to placement, inform them about the family where they will be placed (e.g., one participant states that he was not asked or informed about his placement and was taken from school without prior knowledge). Professionals should use a language acceptable and inoffensive to children (e.g., *don't tell the child that his mother is a drunk, say alcoholic*), and **assume responsibility for the children that they are placing**.
- In relation to the organization of professionals: some children do not know their social worker and talk about the **need for a continuous relationship with professionals**. Some feel resistance to the change of social workers and recommend that social workers do not change (*I miss my old social worker*); contacts of social workers with foster children are few and far between (once in five years or once to twice per year).

It is clear from the last item that the key characteristic of **social welfare center professionals** identified by the children is **lack of contact with professionals and absence of relationship with them**. In this regard, children report irregular contact with professionals from social welfare centers. It is interesting to note that some of the children do not perceive the irregular contact as a problem, but are satisfied with the amount of contact, most likely due to the fact that they are satisfied with their current family and have no need for more frequent and/or better contact with professionals. One boy states that he **perceives the center for social welfare as additional support** (*so I can have someone else on hand*).

9 Specific themes

From the interviews, it is possible to identify some general information about foster children. They generally **present themselves in a positive sense** through the prism of self-satisfaction (descriptions through activities and contacts with others) and/or through educational and behavioral achievements.

Also, we identified some specific themes elaborated by several children during their interviews. In the interviews, children talked about **other children's experiences in foster care** in a generally negative way (beaten, fostered only for money, etc.). The **impermanence** of placement is also a theme identified in children's statements (creates insecurities and negative emotions in children). Some of them **would become foster parents themselves one day** (*If I could, I would be a foster parent... if these children are unhappy and have no family of their own, so they don't have to wait in a children's home for someone to take them in... It's easier for me because I'm in foster care – I know how to treat another child!*).

Summary

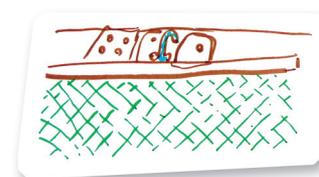
Children generally have an understanding of the reasons for separation from their family, they cite specific facts about their parents and family life, they accept and come to terms with this decision, but find it difficult to deal with on an emotional level.

Foster care is perceived by children as help and something positive for children without parental care. They have a significantly more positive view of foster care than institutionalized care. They are satisfied in their current family, would not make any changes, and generally want to stay. They often talk about the foster family as a real family. They cite advantages and benefits that they gain by living in a foster family. They would recommend their current foster family to others. However, they do not see themselves as birth family members, they are aware of being different from children living with their own families and sometimes feel stigmatized and/or insecure. The feeling of belonging and security is enhanced by acceptance from foster family members and planning a future together with this family.

A focus on the perspectives and feelings of children is absent because children feel neglected throughout the process by professionals in social welfare centers. Their experience is that they are not acknowledged as people, but rather that the professionals perceive them as a job to be done. Therefore, they propose communication with children, keeping the children informed, children's participation in choices/decisions, gradual "entrance" into the family, certain rituals of coming that would facilitate this "strange" situation, as well as the discomfort and embarrassment, they advise caution in the selection of foster parents so that the family is not found to be inadequate during placement, more frequent visits to foster children, dialogue with children, consulting their feelings, more frequent supervision of foster parents...

Social workers are perceived as people who rarely visit, and when they do, the children are either away at school or not included in the conversation. Some of the children do not know their social workers and some of them resist changing social workers. In spite of infrequent contact, a majority of the children do not feel the need for more frequent visits, probably due to being well-adjusted and satisfied with life in their foster family.

Perhaps the best conclusion is one that could be "read" from one of the interviews and best describes the entire foster care experience of participants in this part of the research: **foster care is a good thing and should exist** (with certain changes).



4.1.2 Foster adolescents

➔ Description of participants

The foster adolescents subsample includes 10 youth, five young women and five young men, placed in the Rijeka, Križevci, Koprivnica, Osijek and Beli Manastir areas. The age of the participants ranges from 16 to 18 years, while the average age is 16.7. With regard to the type of foster care, two of the adolescents are placed in kinship foster care (grandmother and aunt, respectively). Most of them are placed in a foster family together with their siblings (seven out of 10). Two of the participants have had negative experiences in previous foster placements (neglect and abuse in the foster family). In four cases, the foster family also fosters children from other families, while in two cases, the foster adolescent is the only foster child in the family. Some of the adolescents have prior experience of living in a children's home, before and/or in between placements in foster families. The average duration of stay in the current foster family for the adolescent subsample is 4.9 years (range from six months to nine years), and approximately half of them have been living in their current foster family for more than six years.

In relation to above description, it can be concluded that this group has shared, but also different experiences of life in out-of-home care.

It is also important to note that the group consists of adolescents, who most likely have a greater insight into and hindsight of their life and find it easier to verbalize their experiences and evaluate them critically.

Table 6 gives an overview of some characteristics of participants from this subsample.

Table 6 Overview of some participant characteristics (foster adolescents)

Boys	5
Girls	5
Age (average)	16.7
Adolescents previously placed in a children's home	3
Duration of stay in current foster family	4.9
Adolescents placed in foster care with siblings	7
Previous negative experiences in foster care	2

➔ 1 Understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family

Most of the participants **understand the reasons why they were separated** from their birth family and clearly state them. Only one participant (a young man who has difficulties with intellectual function) required further explanation of the question in order to determine whether he understands why he was separated from his family. Reasons for separation from the birth family mentioned by the young people include: **indifference, neglect and abuse by the parents, coupled with a bad economic situation of the family**. Furthermore, they often refer to **sociopathological behavior of parents**, such as alcoholism or other forms of addiction (addiction to pills) of one or both parents, domestic violence between the parents and towards children, mental illness of parents, mother's abandonment of the family, etc. (*As the abuse got worse and worse...; Then the old lady got this postpartum stress and had a nervous breakdown, she got schizophrenia.*). These are actually **multi-problem families where the parents' high-risk behavior** directly threatened the children and caused their separation from the family. In most cases, young people report that they were **displaced after members of the extended family (grandparents) or, most frequently, neighbors sought the intervention** of social services because of concerns for the children's welfare (*...neighbors who were there, they saw this and called the institution and we were taken from our parents.*).

Although they understand the reasons for the separation on a rational level and are aware that they could not live with their birth family, **they are still emotionally linked to their parents and most would prefer to live with them** and their own birth family. The young people also clearly state that life in foster care is good for them and that **remaining with the foster family is better for them than the possible life with their birth family** (*I'm used to this now. I couldn't make it with him again (referring to the father). It would be hard because I'm used to them, the family and all...*).

Two of the young women from the adolescents subsample did not talk about reasons for separation.

➔ 2 Understanding of foster care as a form of care

With regard to foster care as a form of care, adolescents generally **understand the concept of foster care as care in a family** (...so that children can feel what family is like...). One of the participants has **difficulty differentiating between foster care and adoption**, while others talk about foster care as a **family that helps children** and as a form of placement **for children in difficult family situations** (for example, abusive parents or alcoholics). Adolescents in **kinship** foster care generally **do not experience it as foster care**, but merely what it, in reality, is – life with their own extended family (*I feel at home here, this is my home because she's my grandmother...*). In this respect, they explain the lesser degree of supervision by the social welfare centre with the fact that they are living with their own family, and there is no need for more supervision. They also view foster care through the prism of financial assistance for relatives who foster them. Adolescents placed in a children's home prior to living in foster care state that they have **more freedom in the foster family than in the institution**, while those who had never lived in an institution also prefer a foster family over a home (*...because children can always count on foster parents and they can work on themselves more than in a home...; ...foster care is better than a children's home because there is no control over kids in a home and they behave badly...; ...well, in a children's home... in a home you're... like... you can't do your work... you're not as relaxed... you can't do some things that you want to. You're under supervision all the time and... like... here, you can do things... we're used to living here and we do what we want. And we don't ask auntie if we're allowed. Sometimes we do something we're not supposed to without asking her. But like... we're not shut in one place. We can do what we want...*). Some participants perceive foster care as **temporary accommodation** or a **transitional phase**, mostly until they complete their education. Some of the adolescents talk about the foster family as a **surrogate family** (*Because it's better. Like you're at home...; Just like a family, only with foster parents instead of parents...*), but also **foster care as a profession**.

Two perspectives on foster care can be extracted from the interviews: through the prism of child care and altruism and through the prism of money (foster care as a source of income). The above is illustrated by the following statements: *Well, some people do it to help someone, not only for the money. Not to profit from these children...; I think foster care is really ok. I mean...it's a wonderful thing, something wonderful when you can foster children. It's better for children to live in a harmonious family than somewhere where they will have a hard time...; I wouldn't allow people that only want money because I know they get some money, but every foster parent gets money to use for the children and not their needs, but of course there are people who do it only for the money, to increase their income, I wouldn't let those people foster children...; I somehow think they are placed in foster care to feel what a family is like, to bond with people more. I don't know, they can have new experiences, get support, what's most important to them and stuff.*

➔ 3 Experience of foster child status

Most adolescents experience **feelings of being different** and even **shame in relation to their peers** (*Honestly, I was ashamed that I had to be placed in foster care in spite of these young and living people!*). In addition, some of them conceal their foster status from their classmates (*And what did your friends at school say? They don't know. I didn't want to tell them. Why? Because... Because of the labeling. And I don't want to hear it... And I don't think they need to know. I don't ask them... I don't, like, interrogate them about their life... Now I'm supposed to explain my life to them?!*). Young people also speak about **labeling** and rejection from their peers because they have no parents (at least initially), but as a rule, attitudes of peers change once the situation is explained to them (*At first the kids avoided me because I'm in foster care and I don't have parents. At first they were saying I don't have parents. I was hurt. Auntie talked to them and explained that I actually do have parents, but they can't take care of me. And when the kids understood what that means, they actually started accepting and respecting me because of it.*).

In addition to the above, it should be noted that some describe their feelings of being different from their peers through **restrictions and stricter rules of behavior than their peers**, for instance, in regards to going out, socializing with peers, boyfriends etc. (probably associated with the higher level of responsibility of foster parents for foster children) (*I can't function normally like my classmates. For example, they are going to a party today, in daytime, at this one friend's place, and everyone will be there, I mean... all the people that I hang out with... there's going to be a barbecue. So they invited me, but I would, like... I could go only for a little while, or not at all... So I didn't know what to tell them...*).

Some of them also talk about **positive changes in their peers' attitudes** towards them after being placed in foster care (they state that peers are more understanding of them since they were placed in a foster family).

One participant who grew up in a children's home reports **not having a feeling of being part of the family** or the same status as the foster parents' birth children and explains his status in this way, but he does not resent the foster family (*I'll never feel like a child of the family... I'm kind of like a skydiver here. I sort of crashed here. And... I don't want anything... I wouldn't want people to change on my account. They have their own way of life, their flow, their thing...*).

Some describe **acceptance of foster care** and foster children by peers **as completely normal** (*Well, I mean, for me it's totally normal, I'm used to it. In high school, I have the same classmates as before and there are no particular questions, but when they asked me before, I would say that I came here because my mom was sick, that we see them, but the situation is what it is. Everyone's used to it, really.; Really, everything is the same here. I mean, really. Nothing... everything is the same like with my peers.*).

Young people also consider their own experiences in foster care to be a **basis for becoming foster parents in the future** (*It's hard to say now, but I think that if I got the chance, I think I would become a foster parent. I think there's nothing wrong with that. It's an important experience, being in foster care and then becoming a foster parent... connected... yes, I think it would be useful...*).

It should also be noted that young people often mention **success in school** and foster parent's expectations of them (to do well in school), which they associate with greater opportunities for a better and more prosperous future.

→ 4 Characteristics of experience

With regard to characteristics of experience, two adolescents who were previously placed in another foster family, share **negative experiences in the previous foster family** (*We had to work a lot... she beat us... we weren't... we were allowed to play once in a while... we were always in our room.*). Also, one young man had the feeling of having no one to complain to in one foster family where he was not happy (*I was scared... I was little... They (meaning social workers) never came by after they left me...*).

Almost all of the young people consider their current experience in foster care to be **positive and good** and they feel like a part of the family (more on this below), but the degree of the **feeling of acceptance and belonging to the foster family depends on time** spent in the family.

It should be noted that one girl reports **disagreements with her foster mother** who imposes rules of behavior that the adolescent disagrees with. She describes feeling a certain fear of angering the foster mother who often talks about other children's bad experiences in foster care in order to present herself in a better light (*I heard these stories from her (foster mother) and other stories about other foster parents and what they're like. I think this is the best so far. I hear other people mistreat the kids and make them work. Like, these ladies are all made up, while the kids have nothing to wear and they don't buy them anything. She doesn't care how you do in school...*).

Some of the young people who have had the experience talk about **life in a children's home**. One young man feels proud of growing up in a home (*...I like that I ended up in a children's home. Because you make something of yourself. So, no one raises you... and you put yourself... you put things in perspective in life... and in the end, you raise yourself... and you find out what's important in life for you. Because I'm, like, a self-made man...*), while others believe that a home is better because of socializing with peers, and worse because of a lack of control from educators.

In relation to the process of adapting to life in a foster family, the young people report on a **normal process of adjustment**: they found it strange at first, but they grew accustomed to it (*It was weird, I felt like a house-guest at first. Then my foster mother would say, have a soda, you can get some yourself next time... it was a little... how can I just grab stuff in someone else's house, but I'm used to it now, I feel at home.*). It is interesting to note that the process of adjustment is the same, strange and difficult at first, with both kinship and non-kinship foster care.

In the interviews, young people also talk about other children's experiences in foster care and these stories are mostly negative (*they have to work, they're fostered only for the money, they have it bad; they mostly fight with their foster parents, it's not good for them, um, they're hungry... these foster parents... foster parents don't give them the attention they need... to get...*), while they consider their foster family to be good. However, it is vital to note that most of them do not have a one-dimensional view of foster care, but feel that everything depends on the foster family, as well as the children themselves.

5 Participation in decision making

With regard to participation in decision making, responses were obtained during the interviews in relation to three key aspects of participation: participation in the process of separation and out-of-home placement, participation in the selection of the foster family and participation in decisions about their own future.

In terms of **participation in decision making about the process of separation and out-of-home placement**, most of the young people perceive themselves as objects in that process (*they came, they took me, they put me*). They mostly recall interventions by social welfare center professionals and the police.

In most cases, they were displaced at a younger age, against their will and were not consulted in the decision about the type of care, nor provided with clear and understandable information about where they would be placed and for how long (*They just came and got me... And said that I had to... first they came with mom and they... they said I had to go to this family and then they took me away.*). One girl states that she was given false information about her placement – she was told she would stay in the foster family for the weekend, following which the foster mother informed her that she would stay in the family for a year. It should be noted that, at the time of the interview, the girl still had no clear information about how much longer she would stay in foster care.

Youth who were displaced at an **older age report a greater degree of involvement**. In this respect, one young man states that he decided for himself to live with his kinship foster care family (motivated by his relationship with a girl who lives in the same city), while one participant states that she asked to be separated from her family after completing her elementary school education.

Young people report a **greater degree of involvement and participation in decision making about placement in situations when they were placed in a foster family after living in a children's home**. Some state that, in these situations, they demanded to be placed together with their sibling, and one participant describes her foster parents coming to the children's home to get her, rather than being taken by someone and dropped off with the foster family, as a positive experience.

Unfortunately, there are cases where the child was placed in a foster family from a children's home, or placed in a new foster family after experiencing abuse in the previous one, and was still not properly and promptly informed or consulted, but found out from a friend living in the foster family that he would be placed there as well (*They just said, they called me to the center and said that I... that I would go to a family... I had no idea who... and then A.M.'s brother said I was going to that family and not to tell auntie 'cause it's a secret, and that's what happened.*).

Related to **participation in decision making in the foster family**, most of the young people feel that they are equally included in everyday family life and that their opinions are heard. In other words, they feel included in the foster family and generally describe this through everyday activities (games, meals, trips...).

In only one case, there is evidence of disagreements between one young woman and her foster mother regarding boundaries and rules about going out and socializing with peers, as the foster mother sets very narrow and specific boundaries which the young woman cannot influence.

In terms of **deciding on their own future**, the young people talk about being free to make decisions about their education and independent life after foster care. In this respect, they indicate foster parents as those who support and advise them, and make plans with them.

➔ 6 The birth family from the children's perspective

Young people often describe their birth families **through their problems and the problems of their parents and/or inadequate parental behavior**.

Some of the adolescents also mention **interventions by social services** on parents, specifically supervision of parental care, but consider these to be insufficient for making positive changes in the parents' behavior (*He would come, I think once a week or once a month, he'd come by to see what the situation was, that wasn't any kind of supervision, to tell you the truth, not at all. The situation in the house was really bad. I took care of S., they kept drinking, it just went on, and social services were, like, doing something about it.*).

In some cases, parents were sanctioned for child abuse and neglect.

Some of the young people clearly express **anger at their parents and resentment** of the parents' disregard for them and their siblings. Some of them even feel that their parents have not been "punished enough" for their behavior (*They live without children and without responsibilities. They live without us. They have a pretty good life, actually. They don't have responsibilities like auntie. Auntie wakes us up every morning, feeds us. She dresses us, gets us ready for school, she's there when we come home from school... and... she helps us with our homework, while life is easy for them because they don't have all these responsibilities.*).

The majority of the young people have **relatively regular contact with birth family members**, most often their brothers and sisters (especially older siblings) and/or one of the parents (rarely both parents). These contacts are maintained through telephone calls, weekend visits, etc. It is possible to conclude from the interviews that contact with their birth family is extremely important to the young people.

In rare cases, some of them have **no contact with their birth family**, specifically their parents, and report a **lack of emotional connection to their parents** (*She doesn't have that feeling for me.*).

A certain number of adolescents **express a desire to live with their older siblings**, but are also aware that this is not possible due to the older siblings having children and families of their own or due to not having the means to take care of them. Nonetheless, this type of placement is seen as positive (*Would you recommend foster care for other children? For others... depends on what's it like at home. If it's not good? Then... if they didn't have any older brothers or sisters, yes... if they had someone older or a brother or sister... then I would ask their brothers if they wanted to... You would ask their family first? Yes.*).

Generally, the **importance of a relationship with their brothers and sisters** is evident with all the adolescents who have siblings. The young people perceive this relationship as a strength and an important source of support in their lives.

➔ 7 The foster family from the adolescents' perspective

Almost all of the young people experience the foster family as entirely **positive**. One young woman accepts her foster family out of **necessity**, but she would rather live with her birth family. She perceives the foster mother as someone who is **fostering them only for money** (*What do you think, why did X (the foster mother) take you in? Well, I don't know... Probably because that's what she does. She didn't have anyone, they called her, I think this was the only available place. I don't know why else. Also, there's the money. It's not for nothing...*) and describes her through the prism of **responsibilities** that the foster mother assumed by caring for her.

Some of the young people talk about their **foster parents like real parents** (experience of a foster grandmother as a mother or experience of foster parents as parents and a surrogate family: *No different than the life of kids who have real parents...*) and describe foster parents through the prism of **support, assistance, love, care and kindness**.

Most of the adolescents would recommend their current foster family to other children.

In terms of **advantages**, it is possible to identify four distinct categories, as follows:

- **better financial and housing conditions** than in their birth family
- **developing habits**: regularity in school and schoolwork, work habits (chores), cultural habits
- **developing their own positive traits**: persistence, patience, clean living (*...I would be out in the street, hanging out with bad people...*)
- **relational aspect**: help, care, understanding, attention, communication, advice, support, relationship with foster mother, patience of foster mother, assistance, trust, feeling like they are not alone.

➔ 8 The adolescents' recommendations

Recommendations from foster adolescents can be classified into recommendations addressed to four important participants in the process of foster care – foster parents, social welfare centers, birth parents and foster children, as follows:

For foster parents:

- traits of foster parents: kind to children, helpful, loving, caring, honest, responsible, stable, willing and understanding of foster children, treat foster children and birth children equally, help in the child's adjustment to the family (*Well, they should be like, they shouldn't yell at kids when they do something wrong or something like that. They should talk to them all the time, help them, like, if they see they're having problems, so they can work it out or something. It's really, important to help, trust, be honest and loving and commit. If someone decides to be a foster parent, to do it right and take care of the children and everything... Not to profit from them or something like that; I would tell the foster parents, after they decide on this undertaking, to go into it heart and soul, not to discriminate against these children or anything, because, since they took them in, they decided to accept them as equal family members, and not to take it lightly... so everyone should decide what they want first, so that the child doesn't have to suffer later...)*)
- motivation for fostering: help and support, not financial gain

For social welfare centers:

- in regards to foster parents: higher level of control over the foster family, more frequent visits, checks of foster parents before they are allowed to take in children (*they should be checked out, I mean, not put him in a family just to put him somewhere, to get rid of him...)*)
- in regards to foster children: ask for their opinion about separation, explain the process of separation, not move children from one foster family to another or a children's home, etc. because children do not know where they belong, communicate more with the children during the initial adjustment to the foster family, but later as well (*...foster parents go to these meetings in the center, but I think it would be better if the children went too so the children can be informed about everything, maybe to younger children, not to me now, it feels secretive when they go there...; ...it's important... I don't know... like... to examine everything, investigate with the kids and stuff. Maybe the kids would tell them if something is wrong and they could help them like that. If no one asks anything, kids will shut down and that's it – they just won't say anything...).*) Organize joint meetings, trips, etc. for children, centers and foster parents (*I think there should be more of that, like a trip they organized during one winter break... both foster parents and children went and they got instructions, how children should behave and how foster parents should behave. I think there should be more projects like that...).*)

For birth parents:

- more stringent interventions (*If no one can make them take care of these kids, why did they have them at all?!*)
- help parents in terms of education on child care, but also expedite the process of separation and control of parents (*Try to help him to get us back. Take care of him like they take care of us. Like they placed us, they could try doing something with him to help him.*)

For children:

- It's ideal to stay with the birth family if that works.
- Foster care is better for younger children (*...it's easier when you're younger and you don't understand what's going on. You don't understand what's going on and everything is like POOF... and then these people are here, they take care of me, they're right for me and that's that... and when you're older, you understand everything... and that's harder...).*
- Children need adults' advice about separation because they don't have experience.
- Children need help when they leave the foster family (*...to make it as nice as it can be, because after all, it's a goodbye...).*
- Children should not be prejudiced about foster care because it exists for their benefit (*...I would tell them not to have any prejudice, regardless of being taken away from their family, it's for their own good... come into the family with open hearts and minds, know you'll be accepted for what you are...)*

9 Specific themes

Young people mostly **present themselves in a positive sense**, they list their positive traits (social qualities, focus on others, intellect) and/or present themselves through academic achievements.

We identified some **specific themes** elaborated by several adolescents during the course of their interviews. The themes are: the experience of living in a foster family as a habit; changes as one of the key elements of their life so far (change of accommodation, educator, welfare professional) and anger and resentment towards parents.

In terms of their **plans for the future**, adolescents are focused on completing their education (high school level and enrollment in college), or staying in their current foster family until they become independent. They are focused on arranging their own life in the future so they can assist their birth parents, but also their future children (*I think that you have to take care of yourself first to have a family. I know from experience... I want my children to have everything. Secure a livelihood... provide for yourself, a roof over your head... to have something left over that you can give your kids. Not to barely make ends meet and then have kids... I see people that have a bunch...*)

I knew people in the home...like 9 people... 9 kids... they have and they're all scattered in children's homes... what are you doing to yourself??? All right, every child is a joy and all that, but if you only make the child miserable, don't do that to him... that's stupid!)

In terms of **professionals from social welfare centers**, the identified key feature is a **lack of contact with the professionals and no relationship**. Also, the young people describe frequent changes of professionals and absence of trust in the centers and the professionals there (*...I mean that center, I went through so many of these social workers... I don't know my social worker now. I have no idea who this lady is for six months now. I had this lady that me and my mom both had. So... we had this lady together for over 10 years... that's ok... you and your mom having the same one... what can I do with the new one, man??? At least she understands you, knows the history – knows your story. She knows your mom and she knows you. And she knows how things work. And what my mom is like. Now I have to explain to this new lady what my mom is like!?! What my mom is like! When they told me I could visit my mom... please... you can't go see a schizophrenic woman. Don't be ridiculous... you're a social worker and know something about these things... Also, I've seen her (the social worker) two or three times in my life. And she still patronizes me and decides about my future and I don't know what! She doesn't even know who I am! And I don't know her either! I mean... it's like... (sigh) ...Don't change social workers because, once a person gets used to something, no one likes changes. That's just the way it is.*). The young people's experience is that, when professionals visit the foster family, they **focus more on the physical conditions and the foster parents, rather than them** (*They never called me. Auntie talks to them sometimes... so... Not really, she (social worker) came, she looked at the room and that was it. She doesn't talk to us or anything...*).

Some feel that **more frequent visits from professionals are not necessary and assess this in relation to their own positive experience and satisfaction with life in the foster family**. However, when asked what they would do if they were not happy, if they knew who to contact, the response is negative.

In this regard, it is important to underscore the story of one participant who was abused in his first foster family, where he lived for three years, and felt that he could not talk to anyone about it.

Cases where adolescents are satisfied with their contacts with welfare center professionals and feel that they are helpful are quite rare.

Some people **experience social workers as professionals necessary for foster parents** (*They maybe give more instructions to foster parents and tell things to foster parents, and foster parents apply that to their children*).

Summary

Foster adolescents generally understand the reasons for their separation, related to the parents' sociopathological behavior and financial difficulties in the family. Despite understanding the aforementioned reasons on a rational level, and even the fact that life in a foster family is a better solution for them than life in their birth family, they still exhibit emotional connections to their parents and a certain yearning for life in their birth family. They commonly describe their birth families through their problems. In most cases, contact with birth family members is regular and relationships with siblings proved to be an important theme.

When talking about their present experiences, they generally perceive foster care through nurture, help and care for children who cannot stay in their dysfunctional birth family. However, when discussing other children's or their own previous experiences, they view foster care through the prism of financial gain, or a source of income for the foster parents, which they disapprove of. Generally speaking, young people describe their current foster family through a series of advantages (both material and non-material).

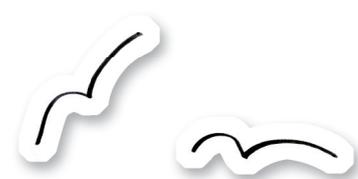
Foster adolescents often talk about previous labeling by peers, but most of them currently feel good and accepted, in spite of being in foster care. Also, most of them feel accepted and equal in their current foster family, despite the initial period of discomfort and difficulties associated with adapting to a foster family. Some of the participants also cite specific problems and misunderstandings with foster parents concerning boundaries and rules.

In terms of participating in decision making at the level of separation from their birth family, the young people were not actively included in the process, in the sense of being consulted, making decisions or being well-informed about their future. A higher degree of participation is present in cases of placement in the foster family from a children's home (i.e., when the separation from the birth family had already occurred).

They estimate that contact with social welfare professionals is infrequent, and they do not perceive the professionals as someone who could be of service to them, due to the fact that they have no relationship with the professionals.

They give numerous recommendations, from more stringent interventions and assistance to the parents, a higher degree of supervision of foster parents, to communication and participation of children in the process of separation and placement in foster care.

In conclusion, it should be noted that foster adolescents have a **generally positive experience of foster care**, but also that **their perception of foster care is not one-dimensional** in relation to the specific characteristics of individual children and foster families. The young people also express a **certain level of criticism (and anger) toward their birth parents** for their inadequate care. In relation to professionals, the most notable aspect is the **lack of contact with professionals and no relationship with them**.



4.1.3 Children and adolescents placed in a children's home following inadequate foster care

➔ Description of participants

This subsample consists of 10 children and adolescents, seven males and three females, who have been placed in a children's home following inadequate foster care. Their age ranges from 10 to 17 years, while their average age is 14.8 years. The majority of the participants is 17 (four participants), or 14 (three of the children) years old. Four of the children are of Roma nationality. All of them have been placed in a children's home no more than one year ago, which was one of the criteria for the formation of the subsample. Four of the children are currently placed in the Koprivnica Children's Home, four in Zagreb Children's Home, and two in the SOS Children's Village.

These children and adolescents have had multiple placement experiences. The children's age at the time of first separation from the birth family ranges from two to 10 years, with four of the children/adolescents separated under the age of 5 years and five at or over the age of 5 years. In terms of number of changes of placement, half of the children/adolescents in this subsample changed placement twice (birth family – foster family – children's home), three of the children experienced three changes of placement (two foster families, or placement in a children's home prior to the foster family). One of the children in the subsample experienced four and another as many as five placement changes. Observing only the number of foster families, seven of the children had lived in one foster family, two in two families, and one child in as many as four families.

Table 7 Some characteristics of participants from the subsample

Boys		7
Girls		3
Average age		14.8
Number of changes of placement	2	5
	3	3
	4	1
	5	1
Years spent in foster care	0-2	3
	2-4	3
	4-6	1
	6-8	1
	8-10	2

Regarding the type of foster care, it is important to note that, prior to placement in a children's home, two of the children had lived with kinship foster families, and three had/have experiences of weekend foster care, i.e. staying with a foster family over the weekend while living with the birth family or previously or currently living in a children's home. The duration of stay in a foster family is exceptionally varied and ranges from 11 months to 10 years, with three participants living in a foster family approximately one year, four approximately 3.5 years, and three participants eight to 10 years. The average duration of stay in a foster family is around four years.

It is clear that these are children and adolescents with very difficult and even traumatic experiences, as evidenced by the fact that both parents of two of the children/adolescents are deceased, fathers of three are deceased and mothers of two are seriously ill. The father of one of the boys is serving a prison sentence, and another boy was abandoned by both his mother and father and did not discuss them in the course of the interview or had no information. Two of the children did not mention their parents during the interviews. Some of the described characteristics of participants in this subsample are shown in Table 7.

In addition to the eight themes which formulate the common data analysis framework, defined based on the specific goals of the research, in the course of the analysis of data obtained through interviews with children and adolescents from this subsample, we also identified the following four specific themes: understanding of placement in a children's home as a form of care, understanding of the reasons for separation from the foster family, understanding of the process of multiple changes of placement and comparison of foster care and care in a children's home from the children's perspective.

➔ 1 Understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family

An analysis of the understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family indicates that children and adolescents generally describe their perceptions of the reasons for separation. Some of the children extensively and directly describe what they consider to be the reasons for separation. Based on this fact, it appears safe to assume that they have thought about the subject a great deal and/or discussed it with someone and "built" their understanding prior to participating in this research. On the other hand, some of the children "enter unprepared" into this discussion of their understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family. They begin with statements such as *I don't know*, *I don't remember* or a description of how they *assumed* that the separation might take place, of every person in their immediate surroundings *having their own story*, or the issue *not being discussed*. During the course of the conversation, guided by questions, these children also formed their view and were able to cite some specific reasons for separation from the birth family from their perspective.

On this basis, we can infer the importance of communicating with children about their specific situation, as well as confirm that, when talking to an interested professional, children are able to clarify their own difficult situation, which is made even more difficult by the fact that they do not fully understand it, cannot systematize it in a coherent whole or talk to someone about it. On the other hand, all of the above are prerequisites for these difficult, traumatic experiences to be accepted and integrated into their life in the future.

In the process of analysis, we identified one comprehensive reason for separation from the birth family, as well as several specific reasons present with some of the children. The comprehensive reason includes descriptions of the family situation that all of the children cite as the primary and broadest reason, before describing the specific reasons or being motivated by additional questions to more exhaustively describe their own view of the situation in the birth family prior to separation. These descriptions depict very difficult and inadequate/adverse living conditions and correspond with the characteristics of high-risk families. One gets the impression that they are necessary as a framework for thinking and conversation for the children, before they can focus on the specific characteristics of family life or family members which they perceive as primary reasons for separation from the birth family (*My mom is... disabled, like, in a wheelchair... so me and my stepfather and her were there, we lived... in some kind of shack. Nothing special. Just, like, wooden. And we lived like that and she was... I had a grandfather too. It was a mess.; But when I got older, I could tell that our family was on thin ice, I could see that we were going under. That they would split up, that our family would be gone...).*

The specific characteristics of family life or family members as reasons for separation include: unacceptable behavior of the father, unacceptable behavior of the mother, death of father and/or mother and the behavior of the displaced child. All of the above reasons are present with some children, while several reasons are simultaneously present in most cases. Different forms of **unacceptable behavior of the father** (abandonment of the family, violence against the partner and child abuse, alcoholism) **and mother** (abandonment of the family, neglect, lack of interest and/or inability to care for the children) are the most common and connected groups of reasons from the children's perspective. The children discuss this subject, for example, in the following descriptions: *because when I was staying with my father, when I was nine, my father was always out drinking, he started hitting me, beating me...; My mom said, made a statement and signed it, that she couldn't take care of me anymore... At that moment, she didn't want to anymore because she knew what I was like with dad and all of that.* **Their own behavior** is the least frequently cited reason (two of the children) for separation from the birth family and it is always combined with other reasons. Considering the age of the children, the **death of the father and/or mother** is, unfortunately, an altogether too commonly cited reason in this group. Children talk about this subject in different ways, mostly very emotionally, and one boy merely states he does not remember this period. We relay descriptions given by two of the children: *Because she couldn't take care of me... she didn't have the living conditions... my dad died.; My dad was killed in a car accident. I lived with just my mom for a while... and then... um... mom got cancer and um... mom died...*

Some of the children with that experience associate the death of the parent or illness of the mother with sadness and guilt (*...before my dad died, he would tell me: “When I die, you’ll be sorry for what you did to me”...*). All of these reasons are described by the children with an emotional charge usually including disappointment, sadness and anger directed at the parents, as well as the professionals – social workers.

Finally, we should also note the presence of **vague descriptions of the understanding of reasons** for separation from the birth family, especially through verbalization of a disjointed account or mere enumeration of information regarding situations in their past (*At first I lived in Zagreb, in G. V., like a village, we didn’t really have the conditions there, I don’t know, then they moved me to Novi Vinodolski when I was three, and I stayed there since kindergarten, for 12 years, then there were some problems, first they found a foster family for me...*). This kind of description was given by two children who were separated from their birth family at a young age. One boy who was placed in a children’s home at a young age does not mention the reasons for separation from his birth family. When asked about the subject during interview review, he stated that he did not find out the reasons why he was taken away from his family or any information about his parents.

2 Understanding of foster care as a form of care

Children understand foster care as a form of care in a number of different ways. Their descriptions of foster care in general on one hand, and their own experience of being a foster child on the other, as well as experiences of other children they met on different occasions, indicate that most of the children discuss their understanding of foster care in different, sometimes mutually exclusive ways. In the analytical process, these individual modes of understanding of foster care cover six different perspectives.

In this group of children, foster care as a form of care is understood through the motivation of foster parents to foster children. **Financial gain and exploitation of child labor** are motivations of foster parents which were most frequently discussed by the children, citing both their own experiences and those of other foster children. In this regard, for example, two girls state: *Everyone in the village knew she only took us in for the money. So she could fix her house.; I would do away with all of it! Because these people don’t do it for the children’s best interests, only for money.* Some of the children understand foster care through the description of **specific types of foster care** (for example, weekend or kinship foster care). Understanding of foster care as care that meets all of the child’s needs and achieves status normalization (**unconditionally positive form of care**) is associated with placement in foster care at an early (preschool) age. This perspective on foster care is also based on their own experiences (*So, when you’re in a foster family, you have a family and live like normal children.*), as well as those of other foster children.

From the perspective of some children, the consent and adjustment of children and good foster parents are key elements of foster care, i.e. **requirements without which foster care cannot be a good form of care** for children. One boy talks about “good foster parents” being important to his understanding through his perception of his foster mother: *When she said something, that’s how it was... nothing was a problem... maybe because she didn’t beat me.* In addition to the abovementioned perceptions of foster care, there is also a perception that **foster care brings a new quality** to child care when it enables the child to become someone, when it guarantees their privacy, safety and a normal everyday family life (*Your own personal privacy... if you make a mistake, you make a mistake and that’s ok, moving on...*). Foster care as a form of care **results in discomfort** for the child if the foster family lives inconveniently far from the birth family, high school and leisure activities or if the child perceives the family as financially unstable and consequently finds it difficult to ask for material things. An example is evident in the following description: *I don’t think I would ask even if they had the money, I would be too uncomfortable.*

In “designing” their own concept of foster care, children do not exclusively adhere to a single perspective, but rather combine the mentioned perceptions of this form of care. Thus, they often combine inadequate foster parent motivation with perspectives on positive and desirable aspects of foster care (conditionally positive form of care, form of care that brings a new quality). This perception of foster care clearly indicates that foster care is acceptable to children as a form of care only if it meets certain requirements which must be viewed individually and adapted to the needs and life circumstances of each child. We will elaborate further on the perceptions of foster parent motivation. The literature also carefully examines foster parent motivation which is not and cannot be one-dimensional. The information indicates that the perception of foster parent motivation from the foster child’s perspective is vital because it is linked to the entire experience of foster care as a special form of care.

3 Experience of foster child status

An analysis of the interviews indicates that children experience the status of a foster child differently and uniformity cannot be found even on an individual level. This is not surprising, considering that they perceive their status through its different aspects. It should be noted that, although negative perceptions are more present, there is at least one perception with some positive elements in each identified perspective on the experience of the status of a foster child.

The emotional perception of foster child status appears to be prevalent in this group of children, and their descriptions generally indicate a perception of their own status colored with difficult emotions (sad, ashamed, scared, exploited child...).

Children discussed this matter in quite different ways: *...what I felt like then, I couldn't, I really couldn't describe it. I think I was sad, heartsick.; I was jealous of the room, clothes, shoes, school supplies, schoolbag, school shoes and stuff. I was jealous, I can't say that I wasn't...; Every time anyone did anything, it would be mine or the little girl's fault and that, like, really bothered me...*). This kind of experience of their own status of children with the "most negative" experiences in foster care should concern the professionals and requires a series of activities – from the planning level to the level of supervision and evaluation of out-of-home care for each individual child. At the same time, two boys talked about a positive emotional perception of their own status as obedient, diligent children and about their sense of pride when they heard statements like *...we'll never have a hardworking child like this again*. Talking about their status based on **fulfillment of existential and psychosocial needs**, children more frequently state that these needs were not adequately fulfilled (for example, nutrition inferior to other family members, feeling redundant, etc.). In this regard, one girl describes her experience as follows: *They ate at the dinner table! She served everything all nice, like in a restaurant. Meanwhile, we ate at a small table, like this, we would gather there and eat*. This kind of experience of their own status in the foster family seems especially difficult, as well as questionable because the fulfillment of a child's needs in a family environment is a key aspect of the positive understanding of foster care. Children also often express their belief **that age greatly affects the status of a child** in a foster family and, according to them, younger children have a more favorable status in a good foster family. One seventeen-year-old states: *When we were younger, when we were kids, everything was ok*. Younger children can also have a less favorable status in an abusive foster family because they cannot protect themselves or seek outside help (*She couldn't do anything about it... she didn't even know it was something really bad when she was little...*). Children also described the experience of their own status through the **formal and administrative aspect**, where they also described feeling neglected by the system of social welfare (*She never called to ask how I was doing, just to ask if we paid a portion of my dad's pension...*). The children also have a surprising knowledge and understanding of procedural requirements for their ability to maintain contact with the foster family (*Well, now they have this judicial law that us kids can't spend breaks and weekends with the family, foster family, because some ministry... And so... they convened the expert team for me about a month ago, maybe more...*).

However, the question that we professionals need to ask is – is it really necessary for these procedures to be so complicated and prolonged? Can laws and procedures be passed from the perspective of children and not parents, foster parents or the system? Can they have a child-friendly form and be presented to children as such? Finally, it should be noted that, at the level of professional policy, the status of the child is usually discussed through six aspects: availability of food and feeding habits, safety and care, protection, health, psychosocial needs and education. The children discussed all of these aspects except education, not surprising considering that the discussion was more focused on family issues.

➔ 4 Characteristics of experience

When analyzing the ways that children understand their past experiences, it is possible to identify a segment of shared, similar experiences, but also a number of specific ones. Similar experiences are generally associated with **difficult life experiences in the birth family and changes that they were unprepared for and found difficult to adapt to** (*I mean, I knew everyone, everyone, I really knew everyone. And I was tight with all of them. And then you suddenly come to Z. and you don't know anyone. New attitude and stuff. I mean, it was hard for me to adapt.*).

One of the key specific experiences is the **experience of living in a foster family**, which is very different for this group of children. Some of them list the advantages of the experience (*I mean, I called my foster mother grandma and she came to school and everyone thought we were like... normal... a normal family*), while others state it was an experience they would rather forget (*It was very hard for me. I want to forget it as soon as possible. I want to leave it behind me.*). The descriptions of specific experiences also have an **emotional dimension** that often points to feelings of loneliness, abandonment, fear, etc. (*It was really hard. I can't describe it. It is such a strange feeling and I just... uh... you don't know where to go, where to turn to... It's just like you're alone... all alone... just abandoned...; Well, you just lose trust in everything in that situation. And you're not sure if you can trust or not.*). Based on these experiences, children try to **understand themselves and their behavior**, and some talk about their perceptions of themselves and feelings about themselves, different strategies of coping with problems, as well as their own problematic behavior (*How could I be like that over there and like this here? I really don't understand.*).

This very understanding of themselves, their situation and behavior seems particularly important as it can, in some ways, be interpreted as the children's suggestion for dealing with difficult life experiences. Namely, it seems impossible to eliminate circumstances that would result in difficult life situations for the children, including separation from their family, both now and in the future. However, it is feasible to work with children so they can better understand their difficult experiences, feel less lonely and abandoned and more connected to available family members and relevant professionals.

→ 5 Participation in decision making

An analysis of interviews with regard to children's participation in decision making indicates that there are differences associated with the experience of participation, needs of children to participate in decision making and understanding of what exactly "participation in decision making" means. It should be noted that children generally **do not have an experience of participating in important decisions** and consequently talk about being uninformed and "presented with a fait accompli," occasionally not understanding that they could have a more active role in the entire process. Four of the children talk exclusively on this level and their answer to the question – did they ask you what you thought about that, was a simple – *No*. On the other hand, when children did **have the experience of participation in making everyday decisions**, which most of the children talk about, they were asked for their opinion about going out, choice of school, shopping, etc. (*When I would get, I would get an allowance and they asked me... they asked to give me more...; They asked what school I wanted to go to...*). Children talk about these instances when they were consulted in a positive light and with a sense of satisfaction and importance (*I had this social worker. He rules. He asks about everything. How you feel about this, what you think about that, would you like that or not, can we change something...*).

In addition to the previously described (not) having the experience of participation in decision making, the following categories were also identified in this theme: conversation as decision making and reactions to (non)participation in decision making. It became clear through the course of the conversation that some of the children do not fully grasp the concept of child participation in important decision making and perceive every **conversation about their situation** as participation in decision making. One boy describes it as follows: *Yes, we talked. She told me she didn't want to give me up and that she got attached to me, but the situation was so and so*. Some of the children find it important not only to participate in decision making, but also to have the possibility of **responding to decisions and solutions** with which they disagree. This proactive approach was recognized in a smaller number of children, as well as clear messages from some of the children that they become upset when they are not included in the decision-making process. Two of the children describe it as follows: *That's what they proposed, but I just turned it down* (laughing).; *So I asked for a change of placement, to be placed somewhere close to my brothers*.

The children's messages not only confirm the importance of including children in the decision-making process on matters that are important to their lives, but also indicate a need for building a common understanding between children and adults in relation to the question of what is communication with a child in need and which elements of the decision-making process can and should include children.

➔ 6 The birth family from the children's perspective

As noted previously, this is one of the themes most present in the interviews. A strong emotional charge and individual diversity are features of all these difficult stories through which children describe their birth family. On a higher level of abstraction, four categories were identified within this diversity: composition of the family from the child's perspective, relationships with certain family members, problems and pathology in the family and vague stories and experiences. Parts of the conversation relating to the **composition of the family** indicate who they consider to be (include implicitly) in their family. Some of the children include only their siblings in the birth family (*Because I really wanted to stay with my sister because she's, like... she's practically the only thing I have left here*). This is a result of the absence of contact with parents for various reasons (prison, no parental rights, no desire for contact) or of the death of the parents. **Descriptions of relationships with family members** cover the entire spectrum of quality, from satisfied to not satisfied with the relationship, and also refer to various family members – parents and surrogates, siblings and grandparents. Children talk about good relationships and experiences of care from their mother, brother, half-sister, fond memories of their father, grandfather or grandmother, but also ambivalent perceptions of their mother, emotionally empty contact with the mother, a very bad relationship with the stepmother, etc. We recount some of their descriptions as follows: *I simply wouldn't be bothered because I knew, like, I'm dad's first child and I'm his favorite.; Dad was my savior... we had a really great relationship.; My mother is dead to me. I never want to hear from her again, and from my father neither because my father was disgusting...*

It is valuable to know that, according to the children themselves, most of them (except two) have in their extended birth family someone to talk to, and with whom they have some form of relationship and maintain contact. According to the children, their birth families' **problems and pathology** are made up of a broad spectrum of difficult problems which most commonly include alcoholism, domestic violence, serious illness (usually the mother), mental illness or death of one or both parents. This is how the children describe it: *My mom is like... disabled... she had polio... she's illiterate and stuff.; My stepfather, he's a real alcoholic too. I also have a dad. But I've never seen him. When I was born, he left my mom.* Unfortunately, a number of facts about the children's birth families remain **unclear or forgotten**, especially memories of the family in the child's early childhood (*...I don't know, I wasn't close to her when I was younger. She was a mom like any other mom, like, who cares...*). This is a powerful indicator for foster parents, as well as professionals, that it is extremely important to help children to maintain contact and build relationships with, not only their parents, but primarily their siblings and other extended birth family members, that is to say to find a way of "preserving the children's early childhood memories and recollections."

➔ 7 The foster family from the children's perspective

Considering the characteristics of participants from this subsample, a complex perception of the foster family is to be expected. Indeed, the children describe a whole range of diverse experiences. While some children talk about their foster family only through describing the **composition of the foster family** and listing its members (*There was the grandma, grandpa, and the husband. All the other boys... that's where I started school...*), sending a kind message that they do not want to delve deeper into the topic of their foster family, other children clearly and exhaustively talk about their **experiences of humiliation, fear and abuse** by other members of the foster family (*I was sitting in the kitchen and D. was like to A.: Damn gypsy, all gypsies should be killed... stuff like that... So, I'm a gypsy too, you can't...; And she said I was just like my mother, that I would be just like her, so, a w...; Excuse me, but I have to say it, I felt like they were golden and we were crap! Excuse me, but that's how I felt.*). Regardless of the manner, the descriptions of these children do not indicate any positive emotional attachment to the foster family, meanwhile, this should be the key aspect of foster care. Also, these experiences show that there is no clear enough distinction between the experiences of the foster and birth family.

Completely opposite, entirely positive experiences of life in the foster family were identified in the case of two of the boys. In their descriptions, these boys state that, in the foster family, they felt **like in their birth family**. This feeling was augmented by the care of the foster parents, experience that the foster parents treated them well at a younger age, the experience of being a contributing member of the family, helping with various chores, etc. The boys describe their experiences as follows: *About everything, about school, student training, they wake me up every morning, tell me not to cut school, to go to student training. And they checked if I went to student training.; The old man would play with us when we were kids and stuff. Fool around. Tell us jokes. He wasn't strict at all, when we were kids, grandma always put us to bed and gave us a goodnight kiss and stuff like that...*

Some of the children identify both negative and positive experiences when talking about their experiences in the foster family. Based on this fact, one gets the impression that they consider the foster family to be both **acceptable and unacceptable at the same time**. The children consider acceptable anything associated with their care and benefit and related to a kind of fair trade in the family – to give and receive a relationship, attention, work, etc. One boy states: *I drove a tractor, then we lifted bales... it wasn't like slave labor or anything, it was normal, you can't live in the country and expect everything to be done for you, you have to do something*. It can be concluded that the children used these considerations to highlight the importance of real experiences of every family context, including that of foster care, in which “you can't always get your way,” and there are things, people and relationships which suit us better or worse. This kind of perspective on the foster family is a good basis for the preparation of children for placement, as well as work with children and foster parents during placement. On the other hand, children find unacceptable separation from the family for no reason understandable to them, poor relationships with the foster parents (*There was no way I could get along with auntie and uncle. No way, no way...*), abuse and violence on the part of the foster parents.

➔ 8 The children's recommendations

Guiding the conversation during the interviews and frequently revisiting issues related to the children's recommendations resulted in every child providing a specific recommendation regarding the placement of a child after the separation from their birth family. The recommendations arise from their own experiences and are, on one hand, related to the importance of keeping a child informed and obtaining their consent for the placement, and on the other hand, related to the requirements which must be met before foster care becomes an acceptable solution.

Children and young people were unanimous in stressing the importance of **including children in the process of informing and decision making about placement**. They used the conversation with the interviewer to consider in what way decisions should be made about their life that are more acceptable to them and made in a more acceptable manner. When elaborating their recommendations, they are very creative and specific. For instance, they state that it is important to talk to children, really hear them and listen to their opinions and wishes, to explain and prepare them, help them understand that this is an important decision for them. The children phrased it like this: *Before you put someone somewhere, think twice... Think twice and always, always ask for the child's opinion. Explain to them that a foster family gives you some advantages, a children's home gives you other advantages and, I don't know, in two days at such and such time, we can meet in this room at the centre and talk about your decision; ... I would ask him if he felt ok. If he said yes, I would ask again, talk to him some more...; ... talk to them a lot, about the little things and about stuff that was really bothering them, everything. It all helps.* As this was not the case with most of the children, they cite opposite examples and responses from their own experience (*We'll put you in so and so. Come on, man, did you ever ask if that's what I want!?*)

The recommendations generated by the children did not include an unconditional endorsement of foster care as the most desirable form of care. Moreover, if they do recommend placement in a foster family, they list a large number of very **specific requirements that must be met first**. These requirements are related to the characteristics of the foster child in terms of preference for younger age, placement of siblings together and explicit consent to this form of care. They also describe in great detail what the foster family should be like. For example, they place great emphasis on the behavior of the foster parent toward the child (*Not to treat the child brusquely, be considerate, to sit with him and talk when he needs it, and not...*), careful family selection (*...before moving in with the foster family, you go look at the house, the people, and so on... and then the child decides*), foster parent motivation, which they stress should be affection for the children and not financial gain (*So that children can feel love, care and attention*). With these considerations, some children state that they would not recommend their foster family because of their own bad experiences (*...now she says they changed, like, that they're softer. Now I DON'T KNOW if that's something temporary or permanent. Personally, I wouldn't recommend them.*)

➔ 9 Understanding of placement in a children's home as a form of care

Children generally have some specific individual understanding of placement in a children's home as a form of care and are able to verbalize it. While analyzing the expressions of their understanding, we identified differences according to age. Younger adolescents generally associate their placement in the children's home with their personal **physical and emotional security**, with interpersonal relationships and communication with educators as especially prominent features of emotional security (*Well, if I want to cry, I don't have to be embarrassed. I can be sure that they won't hold it against me, they'll understand I'm having a hard time.; I'm satisfied with the people that work with us. It's really nice in the home... People are nice and we have normal relationships.*). In accordance with age characteristics, older adolescents understand placement in a children's home through **opportunities for developing and building their own identity**, (non)restriction of freedom, and peer influence on themselves and their daily life (*I think that in a home, I mean... if nothing else, you can be sure no one will bother you and you can be your own person... you have some chores to do, and if you stick to them... you simply get whatever you want.*).

A key element of the concept of care in children's home that emerged in the understanding of all of the children was the **presence of other children and the different effects of this presence** (*We're like guardian angels to each other.*). The participants' descriptions of the effects of the presence of other children ranged from fun and games (*teammates*), someone who shares the same status and understands, as well as reflects the status, and directly or indirectly helps and protects from various adversities and people (*Well, we're safer, for example, the two of us are safer with ten people than alone.*).

As opposed to most of the participants, two of the younger adolescent boys did not verbalize a clear understanding of placement in a children's home. They presented their understanding through the collation of general statements with no value and emotional connotations, or a lack of interest in this theme. For example, they cite being satisfied with the placement, but do not provide any description. They reduce their understanding of the placement to scant personal information (date and length of stay).

Messages from this group of children on their understanding of placement in a children's home as a form of care hold particular significance with regard to their specific experiences of placement in foster families and children's homes. A powerful message is received about specific issues with respect to the child's age and the knowledge that younger children understand the home like a family, with emphasis on physical and emotional security. This is yet another confirmation from the children themselves that placement in a foster family is beneficial to younger children. According to children, a children's home is a positive alternative on two levels: on one hand, through pronounced presence of other children of the same status, generally seen as a factor in their empowerment, on the other hand, through meeting specific developmental needs of high school age adolescents.

➔ 10 Understanding of reasons for separation from the foster family

In the wealth of individually specific statements of reasons for separation from the foster family, reported by all participants but one, we highlighted four modes of understanding: reasons perceived as new quality of life, their own unacceptable behavior, focus on identifying a single culprit, inappropriate behaviors and relationship of foster parents with the child. Among some participants, these modes of understanding are intertwined, indicating the severity of their situation and difficulties in achieving a clear understanding of the reasons for separation from the foster family.

New needs, for example, in the form of secondary education (*Oh yeah, I wanted to do my student training in V., then I would be home during the week and the weekend, then my foster mother said she would go with me, it's a long trip, I would have to travel, spend gas.*), or new placement possibilities (with an older brother) are examples of reasons which contribute to better quality of life of foster children. Four children discuss these reasons which they find relatively easy to accept and talk about in a clear and positive manner, although that does not necessarily mean that they were not saddened or affected by leaving the foster family. Their **own behavior** and **foster parent conduct** are mentioned as frequently by the children as reasons for separation and are present in five cases, but rarely as the sole reason, that is, generally in combination with other reasons. One boy presents his behavior as the reason for separation from the foster family in the following way: *I was a problem for the school... we would slip out, smoke and stuff... we cut school. I got official warnings and reprimands from the school... and auntie had to go there all the time, she was busy and she had to urgently come to school to get me, so...* Three children, each in their own way, talk about **focusing on identifying the culprit** and the associated feelings of guilt as a reason for separation from the foster family. One boy talks about his feelings of guilt for the consequences of his behavior on the kinship foster family: *He was... it was actually the worst for him because he knew the ones in his class and heard from them and it was like I was embarrassing him. It really was. And he insisted that I go to the home.* (brief pause). *Oh, well. I accepted that.* Another boy talks about focusing on identifying the culprit as follows: *...I was blamed for practically everything in the family. My bro was younger, of course. Everyone protected him, right. Whenever we did something stupid... it was always my fault... I was really tired of that and I said I wanted to come here* (meaning the children's home).

➔ 11 Understanding of the process of multiple changes of placement

As noted in the description of the participant subsample, the number of changes of placement for this group of children is almost three times their number, that is, and each child changed the place and type of accommodation an average of three times. The number of changes of placement ranges from two to five.

When analyzing the interview texts, it is impossible to avoid the impression that these are painful and often traumatic experiences which are, as one girl states, difficult to describe to others clearly and completely (*You misunderstood. All four of us were in M. So, me and my brother G., we were in Š., just the two of us for a month, and N. and E. were in M. Then I asked that they put us all together, either here or there. So they moved us from Š. to M. And then we were in M. for a month*). These experiences are also very specific, marked by a variety of feelings, thoughts and behaviors which can be viewed through focus on self and focus on their own experiences in the process of changing placement and/or focus on others in the same process. Some of the children talk about being uninformed and unprepared for the separation, waiting and uncertainty, sadness and pain, and a number of other experiences. These experiences can be illustrated by the following descriptions: *One time the police and social worker came to get me. Then I grabbed my grandfather's leg. I didn't want to let go, I cried and stuff, then they tore me away, the social worker dragged me on the floor. And I grabbed a tire and dragged it along with me... It wasn't really. It was like, I felt pangs here (pointing to his chest), I was not happy at all.; ...and then I waited for a while for a place to be available here... I waited for about two months... I knew that I would leave... but I didn't know when exactly... because no one told me.*

A smaller number of children were (also) focused on other people during changing placement. For, instance, children describe different reactions of parents, usually the mother, and foster parents during their separation, reactions of neighbors, grandparents, social workers, etc.: *M., when we were staying with this lady, she was sad and cried... and she came to get me and packed my things and said we had to leave because they came for us.; ...and she (foster mother) said: "I don't care, do whatever you want."; Yeah, my foster father, Z., the husband, he was very sad.* The children do not talk directly about how they felt while these other, important adults did things, but the language that they use speaks volumes. For example, children state that in these situations of separation from the birth and/or foster family they were: *loaded into a car, gotten, taken, moved, signed something, they talked about something.*

Once again, the children confirm that every separation of the child from their familiar environment is difficult to understand and/or traumatic for the child. Unfortunately, the children did not give any indication that they were helped through these difficult situations by adults, either professionals or family members. Kinship foster care is an exception to this rule. Therefore, the situation of displacing the child from their environment remains an unresolved problem that requires huge investments in terms of competence and cooperation of professionals and families.

➔ 12 Comparison of foster families and children's homes from the children's perspective

Paraphrasing one young female participant, it should be noted that any comparison between a foster family and a children's home is difficult and that children find it difficult to give an unambiguous answer. Only a small number of the children succeed. Those that **give preference to placement in a home** base their choice on their experiences of a better life in a children's home, more rights, emotional and physical security and support. Two of the girls explain their choice: *I have my own peace here in some way. You have your room and... no one's going to hang over your head and make you... you're just your own person... I mean, I get everything here, books, whatever I need for school and I can continue my education for free, so... plus a scholarship, everything by the rules.; More rights, more security, more security. A lot of friends and a good circle of people. There are more of us here and we can help each other with homework and anything else.* The girls seem more likely to give preference to placement in a home.

The advantages of placement in a foster family are associated by the children with the general welfare of the child and a safer future. Two boys describe it in the following manner: *I prefer foster care, in foster care you have more friends to hang out with and you don't argue with anyone and stuff. I would rather be in a foster family than here... If I could choose between this and that, I would go back there.; Now, choosing between a foster family and a home, I would rather have more kids grow up in a foster family.* Three boys, aged from 15 to 17 years, give preference to placement in a foster family.

The comparison of foster care and care in a home was made by the children through citing specific characteristics which can be seen as **advantages or disadvantages of a certain type of placement**. In this regard, for example, the children's home is described as having rules, order, more structure and control (*they'll test you, they'll warn you a few times, they'll test you again and if you don't stop, police will come to talk to you, like, my dear boy, where did you get the drugs, where are you getting this from...*) as well as less personal space, privacy and freedom. Foster families are described through greater privacy and satisfaction of needs on the one hand, and lesser financial means and discomfort with this aspect of family life on the other hand. Children phrased it this way: *That's hard. But I would sooner stay here (meaning the home) because I've been here for almost a year and I spent only one month there. I'm more adjusted here. I have friends, I have people who hate me, people who love me, and so on. It would be hard to choose. It would be nice being there too, with my brothers. I don't know, that's hard.*

Summary

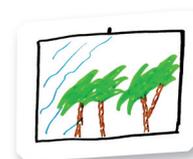
During the interviews, children in this group talked mostly about their birth and foster families and the characteristics of their own experience. Therefore, we can draw a conclusion that these three themes are the most important to children. The children talked about these themes in a very competent manner, with descriptions of their experiences, opinions and emotions. Themes beyond their direct experiences were somewhat more difficult, for instance, the themes of participation in decision making and recommendations.

The general impression is that this group of children, according to the principle “every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” has few uniform perspectives and views on the analyzed themes. It has been shown that the birth and foster family share some negative characteristics (bad relationships, violence, abuse), but also that the foster family has a significant positive aspect for some of the children (like their own family). The reasons for separation from both the birth and foster family are largely associated by children and adolescents with negative characteristics and behavior of adult members of these families. The experiences of children with multiple separations and changes of placement from a familiar environment (birth family, foster family, children’s home) confirmed that every displacement of the child from the familiar environment is difficult to accept and/or traumatic for the child. The only exception to this rule in the children’s experiences is separation from the foster family for the reason of meeting new needs and achieving a new quality of life (easier integration in high school).

The children’s understanding of the concept of foster care can be considered ambiguous, as the perception of the foster parents’ motivation significantly affects the entire experience of foster care, so if the experience is related to money, foster care is perceived as an undesirable form of child care. The understanding of care in a children’s home is also ambiguous, with one of the key elements being the presence of other children and its various positive effects on the children (security, protection and help). A comparison of these two forms of care was difficult for the children, and there are no unambiguous answers to the question of whether they prefer placement in a children’s home or a foster family. If they endorse placement in a foster family, they cite numerous and specific requirements that must be met. This “caution” about conditioning placement in foster care becomes clearer when taking into consideration the fact that the children from this subsample talk about their experiences and foster child status with pain and difficult emotions, largely in a negative light.

The children largely do not have the experience of participating in the making of important decisions, especially those related to choice of placement, but they do have experiences with participating in the making of decisions bearing on everyday life. It seems logical and consistent that their recommendations were focused on this issue, an issue of “demands” for the inclusion of children in the process of informing and deciding on the form and type of placement. We complete this summary paraphrasing one of the girls: *Think twice and always, always ask for the child’s opinion, regardless of the type of placement.*

4.1.4 Birth children of foster parents



➔ Description of participants

Interviews were conducted with 10 birth children of foster parents, six male and four female. Six of them are children, four adolescents, and their average age is 13.5 years. The youngest participant is 10 years old and the oldest 18 years old. All of the participants have one or two birth siblings. The number of foster children in the families ranges from one to three. In two of the families, the foster care is of the kinship type. At the time of the research, five of the families fostered three children (one case of kinship foster care), one of the families two children, and four of the families one child. Siblings were placed together in five families, two of them with three related children (one case of kinship foster care) and three with two brothers or sisters. The average duration of stay in the foster family at the time of the interview ranges from several months to nine years. In one family, the foster child was placed before the birth of the birth child (kinship foster care). Two participants' parents began fostering before they can remember. One child's parents became foster parents when he was four years old, in the case of four children the first foster child was placed when they were approximately seven years old, and in the case of two children when they were approximately 14 years old. For six of the families, the current foster placement is their first, that is the experiences shared in the interviews by the birth children are related only to currently fostered children (including kinship foster care), while four of the families have had previous foster placements (up to six children). Two of the participants are involved in different types of foster care – from weekend and school break foster care, crisis foster care, foster care of pregnant women to permanent placement. An overview of participant characteristics is summarized in Table 8.

Table 8 Overview of participant characteristics (birth children of foster parents)

Boys	6
Girls	4
Age (average)	13.5
Siblings	1 – 3
Number of currently fostered children	5 families – 3; 1 family – 2; 4 families – 1
Age of currently fostered children	From 5 months to 26 years
Previous experience of foster care	4 yes; 6 no

➔ 1 Understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family

Responses of the birth children indicate that they **understand the reasons** for separation of children from their birth families and placement in foster families. Information available to them differs with regard to the information source (mother, foster child). Some families have agreed on discretion regarding the privacy of the foster children and the reasons for their separation, so children state that they are familiar with the reasons, but do not wish to discuss them due to the family agreement. Birth children often **feel compassion with the foster children**, find it difficult to hear about their previous experiences, condemn the lack of care of these parents for their children and the relationship between them. Below are several statements of children on this topic: It's hard for them when their parents leave them.; How can someone be so cruel.; The eldest recounted a terrible experience.; This children are unloved.; Well, me and my mom talked about it a lot and, when I was a little older, I understood that they were not like other children, that they were unloved, and I have my parents, but it must be really hard for them.; He talks a lot about his grandfather who died. His parents visited only once because they don't have a car and his mom is sick, she has a terminal illness. He tells me that he often dreams about his mom dying.

➔ 2 Understanding of foster care as a form of care

Birth children talk about foster care as a **concept of care for children without adequate families** (*It's a good thing because children are given love and happiness, when they're in a home it's different... this way mom and dad are with them 24/7, we play... it's different.; It's a kind of process of helping someone to grow up and helping him through life if he has no one else, or if he's, I don't know, abandoned or neglected, so he can feel someone is always there for him if he needs something.*).

Consequently, the understanding of a foster family is often associated with the experience of a foster family as a **surrogate family** for children who have no families of their own (*So, life with people less fortunate than us who ended up the way they did because of some circumstances in life. And they don't have their own family and we're like their surrogate family.; Because I like helping kids, 'cause it's hard for them when their parents leave them, because it's hard for them when their parents leave them, well, like surrogate parents.*).

A **positive view** of foster care in general can be identified in the statements of all the participants, and some of them are considering foster care as a concept of their own future. They believe that it is **humane and a way of enabling children to be happy**. They are aware of the responsibilities that are entailed in fostering (*These families have more concerns, have to give more attention.*).

➔ 3 Experience of foster child status

When talking about foster children, the birth children often state that **these children are like their brother/sister**. Differences exist based on the duration of stay of the foster child in the family, or age and gender. Thus, for example, birth children establish closer relationships with foster children who have been in the family longer and are of the same gender and similar age, although this does not appear to be a requirement.

Children speak about the **first impression**, tinged with fears and discomfort associated with the children coming to the family, whether being afraid of rivalry, not knowing who will come, or because these children were different at first (*strange, neglected, shy, etc.*) and based on their expectations (*I thought he might be kind of arrogant... take all my stuff... like brothers usually are, but like... the more time passed, the more I saw that S. was ok.*). They talk about **changes** that have occurred and their present **acceptance of these children as members of the family**. In this regard, they sometimes describe accepting the foster child as a member of the family, and sometimes as a friend to play and socialize with (*L. was like my brother, and other foster children like friends.; He was shy at first, quiet, withdrawn, and now... he's like a part... like he's my brother, that's how he acts.*). Acceptance of foster children by the birth children, a close relationship with them and the **experience of belonging to the family** are best illustrated by the following participant statements: *He is a part of our family and he'll stay here, I don't know what it would be like if S. left... it's like... like denying water from a plant... he gets under your skin... he's like my birth brother...; I thought, great, I'll have someone to hang out with and I grew to love them right away and I felt they were like my brothers and sisters.; They're like my brothers, I mean, I consider them my brothers. They're great, I really don't know how else to say it.*

Despite accepting foster children as their own family members, it is not uncommon for birth children to also be aware of the **difference between their status and the foster children's status**, in the sense that foster children cannot feel at home in the foster family. Some statements of the children illustrate the point: *They say (parents) that we are their children, but they love us all the same because since K. and A. are here, they're technically our sisters. Dad said so and I believe it's true* (kinship foster care).

Birth children also talk about **acceptance of foster children in the community** (*Well, I explained that their parents abandoned them for some reason, because they didn't love them or because of money, they understood right away and played with them, they didn't reject them, they hung out with them just like with me.*). Here it seems that foster children are more easily and quickly accepted by communities with previous experience with foster care (e.g. Karanac), while in some communities the situation must be clarified.

The foster child's status is also evident through participation in daily or seasonal family activities. In some families, the foster children equally participate in all activities, while in other families there are some activities that they do not participate in. One child explains: *M. and I. stay with grandma and grandpa when we go to the seaside, but they get to go to the seaside later anyway (organized by the centre for social welfare) and so on.*

A conclusion can be made that birth children do have an awareness that foster children are not their real brothers and sisters and that they understand the "different" status of foster children in the family. However, it is evident from the children's statements that their experience of foster children is mostly **positive and close and that they perceive foster children as their family members.**

4 Characteristics of experience

Children describe their experiential level through the **continuum of experience** with foster care, as well as individual foster children. This relates particularly to the preparation, discussion with parents about fostering a child/children, coming of the children, adjustment and experience of difference in relation to possible previous experiences. In this way, it is possible to identify emotions that range from initial anticipation, excitement about notice of their coming, disappointment when they come because of their own expectations, gradual acceptance, satisfaction with the presence of the child and sadness when the child leaves the family (*I was happy when mom and dad told me that they would take in foster children. Well, I was a little bored, I didn't have anyone to play with, my sister and brother were in school, and when mom and dad said they would foster, I was happy... I thought that children would come the next day so I could play with them. I was so happy, I couldn't wait for them to come, when they came, we started playing right away. It was hard, I was used to them and then they were suddenly gone, disappeared.; Mom and dad said they wouldn't be here forever, that they would leave, but I didn't think it would be so soon. We just all of a sudden got the official decision that they had to leave. So their new parents came in a few days and they were together for a few days and they took the children and they never got in touch with us again.; Now that S. is staying with us, he is a part of our family and he'll stay here... I mean... we won't go through such an experience again...; When the children came, it was hard to watch – the child's father was crying... she's very sweet and sensitive and I think it will be hard for her, leaving.*)

The children's memories very often include a **description of their first encounter** with the foster child which most children described as a **"strange" feeling** (*I needed time to adjust.; It wasn't all the same to me when they came, I mean, it was all new to me. We're not a small family of four anymore, there's a lot more of us and a lot more of everything.; We don't like to talk about it, it was a bad day for everyone.; Strange, awkward situation, I was surprised at first because they knew a lot less than I expected.; Those first comings and leavings are pretty hard, you have to take someone into your family, accept him, live with him, but gradually.*)

One boy describes the day of the foster children coming to his family as the happiest day.

The sense of importance from helping children is not uncommon in birth children, i.e. one boy says that others call him a great man because they have a foster child. One girl states: *When someone needs help, I drop my work right away and go help. It makes me feel good and he's better off than with his mother.; If he's done with his homework and I'm not, I drop mine and go play with him and I do my homework later. But I do it.* This sense of importance is present in their general self-perception, but also in everyday activities.

Negative emotions are also evident in birth children. In terms of so-called short-term placement, children state that they had not anticipated something like that. They expect that the children will stay with them for a while and not leave after several days. These emotions are also present when many different children come and go through the family (e.g. a baby, high schooler, pregnant teen, etc.), and occasionally there is some disappointment due to lack of gratitude from the foster child (*When she left, she acted like we were nothing. That was pretty hard.*).

➔ 5 Participation in decision making

Birth children of foster parents have a **positive experience in relation to participation in decision making**, both about fostering and about everyday decisions. The majority of participants in this group have the experience of being informed by their parents about fostering and asked for their opinion. Children state: *Yes, they called all three of us here and then we talked... they asked us: "What do you think, would it be good if we started fostering, would you agree with that?" We said that we agreed, that we would be united and help mom when she needed.; So, first mom and dad told us that they were thinking about it, that they would foster one child, and as time went on, it became clear that we would foster. And then when it was time to, let's say, choose a child, we went to the home in K. There was a girl there that was pretty sick and we were thinking her at first, but we couldn't because she was fostered before mom and dad were done with some kind of course. Then we went to the home in L. and saw some children there and mom and dad said they didn't care who it was, if it was a boy or a girl, how old and... so. They chose S. and that's that.; I was bored, like, I don't know how to put it... at home, it was just me and mom and dad. My brother was at school and it was really boring. I was ok with my parents, but mom told me about these kids and like, I was talking her into it, that we should take a couple of kids so we could play with them and stuff.; Well, when we started out, we sat at the table and talked about it. We sat at the table and talked openly how, why, what that would be like.; Well, we make every important decision together. We decide together about everything.*

Some children state that their parents could not ask their opinion because they were too small, or that they were asked, but did not feel mature and competent enough to make such decisions. For example: *It should be more for mom and dad to decide, we can give them some advice, what to do.; My opinion is, like... respected, but I don't make the decisions. Children don't make the decisions in our family.; Sometimes they ask me, but I think that if they agree, I agree as well.* Some children feel that they were informed, although not sufficiently. One boy asked his father to explain as he did not understand the situation: *I asked my dad, I asked if they moved here, then they told me everything and asked me not to say anything to I. and G. because they were their parents.*

Children also talk about participating in decision making about some everyday activities (*Everyone is included in everyday decisions.; Not everyone can go on trips so we decide together who goes and who stays at home.*).

It is possible to conclude from the above that birth children of foster parents, in accordance with their age and maturity, participate in making important decisions for the whole family, in this case, about fostering a child. It is difficult to imagine it could be otherwise, as this decision changes the life of the entire family and significantly affects (as shown earlier) birth children, their way of life, experiences, attitudes and even plans for the future. Of course, the situation is different in the case of birth children born after the child had already been placed in the family or a birth child too young to understand the situation. The children's statements demonstrate that parents not only ask for their children's opinion, but also **acknowledge** their opinion. This fact can be identified in the children's statements, as well as some specific cases. One young man states that he socialized with a boy from a children's home, so he suggested to his parents that they foster the child during school breaks and they agreed.

Birth children also reflect on the **need for foster children to participate more in decision making**, i.e., they note that these children are not always asked for their opinion, for example: *Well, I think that adults know what's best for children. Still, they have this experience, but maybe we should also consider the opinion of the children who are moving, after all, they're the ones who are going, moving and are going to live there.*

→ 6 The birth family from the children's perspective

Generally, children rarely mention the birth family of the foster children and there is a sense of **compassion for foster children** for being away from their families, through sadness and suffering, loss and absence. Whether the foster children have no family, or have no or occasional contact with them, the participants are aware that the children need their family and express regret over their situation (*they miss their parents*). This attitude also guides them in making decisions. For instance, one girl, when asked about her opinion about the adoption of one fostered boy, states that he needed his own parents (*We're much better off when there are four of us. It was good when they were here too, but they needed their own parents.*). If the possibility exists, they support contact between foster children and members of their family, although they are aware that living in the foster family is much better for these children. However, it is also evident that the birth children do not have much information about the families of foster children or they do not share it out of respect for others' privacy. Information that they do have disposes them to a predominantly negative attitude towards the parents of foster children.

→ 7 The foster family from the children's perspective

The children discuss the foster family, that is, their own family, through **benefits for themselves/their family/foster children, a positive experience of their family, changes** in the family, but also *losses*.

It should be noted that this is one of the themes that has a wealth of statements. This fact is not surprising because children can reflect on two levels of experience – the experience of their own family and the experience of their family as a foster family. In the case of kinship foster care, participants do not perceive their family as a foster family, but rather focus on the kinship ties.

Children cite a number of **benefits** from their family being a foster family, primarily focusing on personal gains. These can be classified in different categories. They believe they get: **new friends** (*Maybe only that I got more friends.*), **new experiences** (*It's a lot of children and a lot of experiences, so I learn something from him.; We learned something from them.*), **company/fun** in the sense that everyday life is more interesting, they feel bored less frequently, they have someone to play with (*It's boring without the foster kids, we mostly hang out together a lot, we can talk... we can talk all day, we won't get bored.; I'm happy that I have someone to play with.*), **societal status** in the sense of being viewed differently by their friends, their family's decision is admired (*In a way you maybe get... some kind of attention from your friends, because it's great to help someone like that and, I mean, my parents are my role models because they teach you how to live and all that. And I think, I think it's great what they did because they will help her and us.; They tell me I'm a great man.*),

change in their system of values in the sense that they are more appreciative of the conditions that they are growing up in, which are often implicit (family, parents), they recognize the value of helping someone, while also discussing greater unity within the family (*They also helped us realize some things and become more mature.; You could say that I appreciate more, for instance, that I have parents, because she doesn't, so you, I don't know start appreciating more what you have and what you are able to have and what are your possibilities, and she has, like, she has us.; Well, that I realized some things about life and that you can help someone when they need you the most.; I think that we're more united, we appreciate what we have more and mostly it all revolves around appreciating what we have.*).

We have already discussed losses **caused by the foster children leaving the family**, however, they should be mentioned again as this important theme often intertwines with others (expectations, investments, acceptance, belonging, separation). Birth children find separation from the foster children to be difficult and this seems to be the most difficult aspect of foster care in the experience of the foster children (*Only when they go home. That's hard*). Although the children talk about certain difficulties during the coming of foster children to their family, they usually say that these difficulties were short-lived, that they became friends quickly, adjusted, etc. Even occasional discomfort due to lack of understanding that they sometimes encounter in their community is not considered by the children to be problematic. However, a foster child leaving the family, especially a child that has lived in the family for years, appears to be a very large and real loss for the birth children.

Talking about their own family through the function of foster care, the children almost always express a **positive attitude and experience of their own family**. They express satisfaction that their family has helped someone and cite motivations that they attribute to the decision of the family to become a foster family (protection, help, gratitude). (*Because my mom was that way (fostered) so I guess... how can I put it... I somehow feel for these children.; We protected someone, a child, the motivation is help and not money.; I mean, we don't do it for the money, but to, I don't know, to help her when she doesn't have anyone and then she'll be grateful to us one day that we raised her and that she stayed with us.; I mean, helping someone less fortunate.*).

This theme is linked to the theme of **reasons for fostering from the perspective of birth children**. The children attribute the reasons to the altruistic motivations of their parents, their willingness and desire to do it and emphasize that their parents are good at it (*Mom and dad like doing this, my mom and dad like doing this. They've been doing it for years and they like it. They're used to it, so they get children. It's just a little hard for them when the children leave.; My parents want to help these kids, they like helping these kids whose parents leave them.*).

In addition to feeling good about being able to and deciding to help someone, the children form their opinion about their family through reactions from their community. They point out that the reactions are positive, that members of the community admire them for their decision, but they also mention some negative reactions (*I see my family as successful, normal and happy, most of the reactions from the community are positive, only some of my classmates think it's a bother.; We had some cases, people were like, how can you have a stranger in your house. There are also those who appreciate it, who see that it's a good thing.; My friends are envious that we're such a big family.*).

In addition to their satisfaction and the reactions from the community, the participants are aware of the amount of effort invested, most often by their mothers, but also the family as a whole. To that effect, they list upbringing methods and procedures used by their parents (*My mother had to help her throughout her education because she wasn't independent.; as a family, we did a lot for these children.; Mom really put a lot of effort into it and a lot of talking. So, through talking, mom would sit them down and work everything out through talking.*).

Children talk about **changes** caused by fostering on all levels in their family. They notice changes that the family has made for new family members, clearly recognizing and verbalizing some, but not all: *A lot has changed, there's more of everything, more furniture, a bigger car, a relationship with each of my cousins. At first it wasn't like before, mom would cook more. Then again, she would make... that was really strange, she would cook one chicken and we would eat the whole thing and now she cooks one chicken and the seven of us can't finish it. It's... strange, I don't know, I still don't understand it, really strange.* The children also notice positive changes in foster children, accomplished mostly through the effort expended by their parents (*They have completely changed in these 11 years.*).

A relationship to their family as a foster family can also be identified through the perspective of the children that want to become foster parents themselves, although some of the children state that they would take in foster children only if they could not have children of their own and some state that they are too young for these kinds of decisions.

➔ 8 The children's recommendations

The recommendations of birth children **are numerous** and largely aimed at professionals as social welfare centers, but also foster parents, even birth parents of foster children. These statements indicate their “deep” involvement in foster care, their thoughts, but also emotional experiences of situations in their family, especially in relation to foster children. Mostly, referring to their own experience, the children state how they would want to feel and what they could take away from that position as a lesson, a suggestion for improving foster care, which is that all members of the foster family should feel comfortable.

Recommendations for professionals in social welfare centers:

- **more contacts and communication with children.** In this sense, the children state that professionals should use their visits to check on the children's progress, living conditions, and any discrepancies, while making these visits as pleasant as possible for the children. *(I think these social workers should regularly visit foster families, so they can see the environment, check the progress and everything, and then they can draw these conclusions of what the family was like before, so they can try something similar, so it's not too different and there aren't any aberrations or anything like that.).* Research participants stated that social welfare professionals do not communicate with them, although they express a desire to describe how they contribute to the development of the foster child *(To ask me what I do with L., if I want him to go back to his mom or not. That's what I want them to ask me.).*
- **recommendations for the initial coming of the child to the family.** Participants feel that the foster care process can be improved through a gradual coming *(At first, the children can come just to get acquainted, and then later for good – so it's not “weird.”),* informing and better preparing the children, awareness and acknowledgement that time is needed to adjust *(To start out slow, so... because it's not all the same to children. It's... it's even worse than before they were in foster care. They want the children to feel at home right away, but that's not possible, they have to adjust first.).* Children feel that professionals should use their expertise to see things from the children's perspective and help them in that way *(Professionals could make things easier for these foster children because... they know a lot more about it than us, they should know how to change these feelings of discomfort and organize a little party.).* In terms of the foster family, they feel that professionals should acquaint the foster family with the characteristics of the child they will be fostering.
- **acknowledge the children's opinions (foster and birth):** *I think they should also consider the opinion of the children who are moving, after all, they're the ones who are going, moving and are going to live there.*
- **scrutinize the foster families** with emphasis on characteristics that foster families should have *(Clean and kind people who have a knack for it and work everything out through talking.; I would tell by talking to them and their appearance, you can tell what they're like, I would talk to children – ask them if they wanted to go to that family.).*

- **professionals should put in more effort** as the children's impression is that they just want to get the job done and do not consult and acknowledge the children's opinions enough (*I think they should adopt an attitude that it's more than just their job. Give a little more of themselves. Because, in my experience, it doesn't look so good.*).
- **communicate with the foster families, provide support and assistance** as the children perceive both the professionals and other foster parents as a source of support (*We talked about it and you could tell that it was hard on her (the mom) because no one did anything. It's like no one appreciates how hard she works, how much of herself she gives. It was pretty hard on her and us too.; Maybe other foster parents could help in these situations... they already have experience.*).

Children with the experience of living with a foster child of similar age emphasize that this practice is good and endorse generational closeness (*The children should be the same age.; So we can socialize more.*).

In general, the birth children have a negative attitude toward professionals (*It was the first time he met her and it was a little strange. I mean, he was acting like it was some kind of merchandise and not a child.*). In one case, the participant demonstrates a **positive experience with the social welfare centre**: *they regularly come from the center, they bring chocolate or candy, they talk to me too sometimes and ask me how I'm doing.*

As previously stated, birth children experience strong feelings of loss caused by foster children leaving the family. Therefore, they speak about the **need for maintaining contact**: *Since we were friends, so we can keep seeing them, because we loved him like a brother.; To stay in touch, they don't have to come and see us, just to talk to them, ask their parents how they're doing. But their parents don't want that.*

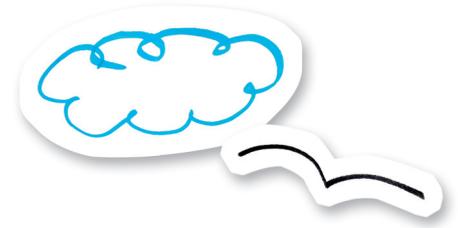
Recommendations for the parents of foster children are related to increasing concern and contact with their children (*To visit their children more.; I have something to say to the parents whose children we foster, I mean, if they brought this child into this world, to try to take care of it as much as possible. To fight for these children. They are their blood...*)

9 Specific themes

As a specific theme, we identified **confusion and disappointment in the experience of birth children**. The primary issue is the **lack of criteria for the placement of children in a foster family and the lack of specialized foster care** (short-term placement, multiple placements, numerous and sudden changes, from several days to years, or during weekends and school breaks): *That's not how I pictured it. Not like that. I thought that the child would come and stay with us for at least a few years, and not a couple of days or months. The coming and going, that's pretty hard.* Talking about this subject, the children also discuss negative experiences, difficulties in getting used to constantly changing family circumstances and uncertainty of future events.

Summary

Birth children generally talk about their experience with foster care through positive experiences, through a number of benefits, primarily to themselves, and mostly through the experience of foster children as members of their own family, siblings, company for play and socializing, but also through satisfaction that they are helping someone in need and are therefore more appreciative of what they have in life (family). Some of them see a future in fostering. It can be argued that they experience foster care as a concept of help for children without parents (whom they experience as deeply unhappy that they cannot live with their family) through life in a surrogate family. Although the experience of birth children depends on the age of the child, duration of experience, number of fostered children, type of foster care, changes that occurred from the idea through the placement, up to the parting with foster children, there can be no doubt that these children exhibit a certain satisfaction and pride in participating in such a humane mission, raising awareness that it is good to do good. However, there are differences, based on age and maturity. For example, younger children often experience foster children as friends and playmates, while older children and those with experience of long-term placement experience these children as siblings. One does not get the impression that these decisions are forced on them, but rather that they had and still have the possibility of participating, together with other family members, in the making of such decisions. However, they do acknowledge that children (themselves, as well as foster children) are not sufficiently included in decisions that have a direct impact on them. Thus, they express great sadness and resentment over long-term foster children leaving their families, often without clear reasons or chance to say goodbye. They find it even more difficult that they often lose all contact with these children. We believe that it is not necessary to elaborate what the loss of a close person or relationship at that age means. The children attest that their feelings and thoughts are not taken into account in the case of separation of foster children from the foster family. This theme is a constant in the stories of our research participants. Birth children also have a number of recommendations for adults, primarily social welfare professionals. The recommendations are based on heartfelt compassion with foster children and understanding of their perspective of a child without a family. This sensibility of the children should not be ignored when considering in which way foster care could be better and happier for all.



4.1.5 Adults with experience of living in foster care as children

➔ Description of participants

It was planned that the subsample of adults with experience of living in foster care as children would consist of 10 adults, placed in foster care as children, who answered notifications published in various media and certain web pages, with the condition that no less than five and no more than 15 years have passed since the placement. The formation of the subsample of adults with experience of living in foster care as children according to the aforementioned criteria proved very demanding and unachievable in the given timeframe as the response of potential participants was unsatisfactory. Therefore, it was decided that other methods be used in the formation of this subsample, such as **personal and professional acquaintances** of the research team members and UNICEF employees and the **assistance of already included subsample participants**. Subsequently, the subsample of adults with experience of living in foster care as children was formed as follows:

- Six individuals responded to the call at the recommendation of UNICEF professional staff and experts with whom members of the research team were in contact in the period from January to June of 2011.
- Three individuals responded to the public notification on UNICEF web pages, advertisements in local papers or were contacted based on a newspaper article, all in the period from February to April of 2011.
- One individual responded at the recommendation of a previously included research participant in May of 2011.

As shown in the description of their characteristics, the resulting participant subsample is extremely varied (an advantage in research based on qualitative methodology, such as this one). Some characteristics of participants from this subsample are shown in Table 9 and most other characteristics in the following text.

At the time of the interviews (from February to July of 2011) the participants in this subsample were aged from 21 to 45 years, with six persons under the age of 30 years, one person aged 32 years and three persons aged from 41 to 45 years. This also indicates that the range of time passed since placement was significantly expanded relative to the original plan and ranges from two to 28 years. The experiences of two thirds of the research participants fall under these expanded criteria, so five to 15 years have passed since placement in four cases, less than five years in three cases, and 20 to 30 years in three cases. The subsample is balanced regarding gender. Furthermore, the subsample includes participants who have achieved the level of secondary education (four), higher education (three) or are still students (three).

Table 9 Some participant characteristics

Men		5
Women		5
Age	< 30	6
	30-45	4
Age at the time of placement in foster care	< 5	5
	7-9	2
	12-14	3
Years spent in foster care	4	2
	9-10	3
	14-19	5
Number of foster families	1	7
	2	2
	3	1

Prior to placement in a foster family, four of the participants in this subsample had lived in a children’s home, from two to 12 years. Two individuals had lived with their mother, three in their birth family and one with their grandmother. As a rule, early placement (under the age of three years) occurs with individuals previously placed in a children’s home, while direct separation from the birth family generally occurred at an older age. Four of the participants in this subsample were placed in a foster family at the age of three years, and one participant at the age of five years. Two persons were placed in a foster family at younger elementary school age (seven and nine years), while others were placed at significantly older age of 12 (one) and 14 (two). The majority of participants in this subsample (seven) have the experience of placement in a single foster family, while placement in two or three families is an individual experience. As a rule, participants from this subsample were placed in long-term foster care. The duration stay in foster care is most frequently in the range from 17 to 19 years (four participants) and least frequently approximately four years (two participants). As many as five of the participants were the only child in their foster family. In cases where there were other foster children in the family, long-term foster care was as frequent as short-term placement of children from children’s homes on weekends and school breaks.

After their leaving the foster family, participants from this subsample continued down very different paths. Accordingly, they cite the following life decisions immediately after the termination of their placement in a foster family:

- two of the participants built a family of their own that they still live in
- two of the participants started a completely independent life
- two of the participants started a new family which is linked to the foster family (foster parents live with them, they built a house on the foster parents’ property)

- three of the participants returned to their previous environment (family apartment where the father lived, grandmother, children's home) to later make other opportunities for themselves
- one young participant continues to live with the foster family as his own, even after the termination of the placement.

At the time of the research, all of the participants could be considered successful and perceive themselves as such. Six of them are employed and three are in university. Five have started their own family, have children of their own and secured housing. It should be noted that most of the participants still have regular contact with the foster parents or their birth children in cases where the foster parents are deceased. Moreover, as previously mentioned, some of them (two) still share their everyday lives with the foster parents in various ways.

➔ 1 Understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family and placement in foster care

The participants' statements indicate that they **understand** the reasons for separation from the birth family (to a home or foster family). As for the participants separated at a young age, these stories were recounted to them by others, usually the foster parents (*According to the foster mother, my mom had problems, always with the alcohol. She would come to work intoxicated and late so they fired her.*). Participants who were separated at an older age (from nine to 14 years) talk about their experiences and perception of their family situation, as well as **numerous difficulties such as neglect, abuse, alcoholism, poverty, death or illness of a loved one who cared for the child**. The participants express different emotions when talking about these issues, **from sadness, disappointment, pain and anger to indifference and understanding of the situation**. These are most likely affected by the passing of time, as well as satisfaction with their own life in the foster family and later. One young man who perceives the foster family as his own talks about reasons for his placement in a children's home and, later, foster care through understanding and defending his birth mother who found herself in the situation as a result of her young age and lack of support from her family: *She was really young and her dad and brother disapproved... that's the mindset in Dalmatia, especially with a child out of wedlock, they didn't want to have anything to do with her... I can understand her, it was difficult for her. Maybe I would do the same in that situation, I don't blame her*. Two participants verbalize their understanding as follows: *Because she (the mother) did not have the means to take care of me. I mean, it's not like she didn't want to, she just couldn't. And she was married to a man who harassed her and she couldn't give me any protection or offer me anything; I didn't have the means... I wasn't living with my mom or dad, and grandma couldn't support me so my elementary school teacher took my biography and it was in the newspapers for a while. Then they called social services and I was placed in foster care.*

We recount some very difficult descriptions of life in the birth family prior to separation:

I don't have the words to describe what he was like... there was a lot of violence in the family, really, enormous violence. It was hell... he beat my mom right in front of me, in front of little children, my brothers and sisters, it was horrifying. Mental and physical harassment... Really, I don't know what hell looks like, but this was... he spent all the money on, I don't know, alcohol, card games... I don't know... We never had any food in the house because he would squander everything. The conditions were truly terrible... then they decided to take me from the family because I shouldn't have to put up with it. I was there for all those years (14)... and then they took me away.; There was harassment and alcohol, all kinds of things. I moved in with the foster family, with auntie, when I was nine. I lived there until I turned 19. My father abused me, he drank constantly, every day, it was unbearable, he came at me with a knife, I had an axe in my chest. This happened every day, that my father abused me. It was the alcohol, it was like that even before I was born.; ...my father, he was the head of the family and he was a little violent, he beat all of us. His wife and us kids, depending on... the size of the child, that was the intensity... genetically, my father was a drinker and he passed that behavior on to my mother because she couldn't take it anymore, until this breaking point when they weren't even aware they had us, we would be locked in the apartment for seven, eight hours, with practically nothing and women, we were lucky that the apartment was on the ground floor, so they brought us food, milk, bread, so we could survive because they weren't even aware they had us.; The situation was that my father started drinking, I don't know why exactly. My mother, because there was a lot of us kids, and all these responsibilities with the kids, there was also a farm where she worked and she just couldn't do it all, maintain and take care of everything and she became mentally ill after a while and wasn't able to raise children anymore. That's how we ended up in a children's home.

In some cases, the participants still (sometimes after more than 40 years) **do not know the real truth**, the real story, which their parents kept from them and they have no one to ask. One participant mentions "different versions of the story" and does not know the real reasons she was separated from the family, even though it still troubles her to this day.

Also, the participants talk about their perception of the reasons and ways they were placed in foster care if they had previously been living in a children's home or a hospital. For example, one young man who was initially placed in a home and then in a foster family at the age of two years has his own explanation of why the foster parents chose him: *I think they liked me, that must have been the main reason. I had long, blond, curly hair, blue eyes... I think that was the winning combination (laughing). Another young man states: We went to the hospital first so they could run some tests if we had any diseases because they couldn't take care of us, we probably didn't have health care, I don't know, maybe we were coughing or something and they had to make sure. You can't bring a sick child, so to make sure... we were in the hospital for, I don't know, two or three days and it was like a little excursion for me. That's how I experienced it.*

➔ 2 Understanding of foster care as a form of care

Participants express a **positive attitude towards foster care as a concept of care and help, primarily for children without adequate family care**. They give a number of recommendations (more on this in Chapter 8) about what should be done and in what way for this concept to be truly realized the way it was conceived, i.e. for every child to have a family and the opportunity to be raised in a healthy family.

Although most of the participants have a positive attitude towards the concept of foster care, as well as positive personal experiences and a certain degree of willingness to become foster parents themselves (*I'm sure I'll be a foster parent, in addition to having my own kids, why not, just one more challenge.; Love comes first... I would take in children to help them and give them affection, because someone helped me. When I needed a mother's love and embrace the most, I didn't have it. Auntie gave me that. So, I don't know, I want to do it, sooner or later. To help these kids. Like I said, to give them a warm embrace, if nothing else. A roof over their head.; If I had money, I would be a foster mom! I would take in some awkward kid with big ears and a big nose, one that's not blonde and curly and has the potential to make it on their own, no... some awkward kid... if I only could, if I had the financial means.*), sometimes the idea frightens them, they see it as a great worry and responsibility, fear of uncertainty, even work (*...I admire my auntie and the way she... I mean, there were five of us and she had time for everyone and... I don't know, this responsibility... I don't know if I could do it. Maybe one or two, but five – no way... she had her own children too, and grandchildren, and a job and the five of us. I don't know if I could handle that. If I went into it one day, I would do only that.; Right now, I'm just afraid that might cause a disruption in my life, some type of discomfort, and a woman doesn't think about that. I think about these things, so I'm kind of torn a little. Would I, wouldn't I. Within reason, as they say. Because some kids coming to children's homes today have mental problems. If a child is placed in foster care at the age of 10 or 11, it's already, she (foster mother) put it well, kind of already bent. And it's harder to set straight.*).

One participant, whose foster parents wanted to adopt him but were not able to, talks about **foster care as synonymous with adoption** because he felt and still feels like an adopted child, equal to birth children. Another participant says he would always give preference to adoption (*adoption number one, and foster care number two*), but feels that children should stay with the family in the case of foster care as well, as they get attached (he has the experience of continued life with his foster mother).

Speaking about the concept of foster care, the participants often discuss their thoughts on **motivations** for fostering children. As key motivations that the foster parents should be guided by, they stress love and help for children without their own family, as well as people without their own children. They exclude the option of financial gain being the main motivation for foster care. Some state: *...so, I'm sure there are people who take in children only for the money. There must be cases like that. Different strokes for different folks.*

I'm sure they're out there. Love – well, I think there has to be love. Not to take it lightly, so, if you make the decision, really accept it as your own, treat it fairly, no more and no less... I mean... as much love as possible... not spoil or keep under a glass bell.; I would rather adopt a child than be a foster parent. The idea of getting money for children is somehow, I would like to adopt a child someday or take a child from a home to spend some time with, but this idea of someone getting money, you know, for me to get money for children, I don't like it.

Participants reflect about foster care thoroughly, based on their own experiences as well as information they gather from the media (*it's different today, it's written about a lot today...*), and they believe that **love alone is not enough** for foster care. One participant states: *What you have to provide to foster parents, provide awareness... information, you have to... educate them in a way. So they take it seriously. It's not just about breakfast, lunch, dinner, going to school twice... no... you're dealing with children who weren't so lucky... they were dealt a bad hand. So, it's not so important that they eat meat every day... it's a lot more important that you hold them, embrace them every day... you have to teach them they're dealing with wounded kids. That have... I still have this feeling today... not anymore, because I worked on it with a psychologist... the subconscious is still ticking away. Who knows if I'm worth anything if my own mother didn't want me?*

Based on their own experience, some participants also talk about the issue of placement in foster care together with their siblings not being possible due to an absence of this type of foster care (for five children), so they were placed in different ways (he was placed in foster care, two younger children were adopted, and two brothers placed in home). Another participant points out the advantage of being placed together with his brother, as other foster children, and there were many in the area at the time, were not as fortunate. One participant describes his happiness after being placed together with his siblings in his second foster family: *If we couldn't be with our parents, at least us children were together, that was great, in that respect, that we didn't have to wait for school breaks to see each other, we were together every day.* With regard to the concept of foster care, they stress the need for continued contact and **belonging to the family throughout their lives**. One participant phrases it well: *So they can try being grandparents... I didn't have anyone to show him (son) off to! It sounds silly... you know... I graduated and I'm standing there with this tube... and there's no one. Only parents have that proud look! They tear up, right... I'm holding this tube and barely holding in tears... I am proud of myself, but there's no mirror to see this pride in the eyes... the role of these people is very important! I saw the SOS Children's Village on television... these people maintain contact. Maybe regular foster parents should be taught to be like that. To be grandparents. To be... I mean, they need education, money, supervision.*

All of the above bears witness to very serious reflection by participants in this research who are often, in spite of positive personal experiences, aware that foster care is an extremely complex and demanding concept, from idea to realization, and requires constant questioning, upgrading, supervision, as well a high level of social control. Therefore, in addition to those stated thus far, they have many other recommendations for improving the quality of this social intervention, which can be found in Chapter 8.

➔ 3 Experience of foster child status

Participants largely talk about **acceptance into the family and community, inclusion, belonging, equality and positive feelings**. If any problems are mentioned, they mostly occurred in the early days of the placement or in early education, when children are inquisitive, however, this apparently brief period seems insignificant to participants from the present distance (*...only with children, but when they're young... they don't understand.*).

The experience of foster child status in a foster family can be illustrated through several quotes: *They accepted me as their own, grandma and grandpa too, their son and daughter, all of them. They meant more to me than my parents, they gave me more.; ...they wanted me to have their last name... I'm their child, they see me as their son.; How can I describe it. Everyone accepted me, no one was opposed or rejected me, they treated me like I was their own.; She (foster parents' daughter) always loved me... I would go with her to those trampolines, to McDonald's, they always took me places... for instance, when I was little... I spent a lot of time with her... I went with her friends, she would take me because mom and dad were at work... and now, maybe... my brother (foster parents' son), in the last couple of years... because, like... we're guys and we give each other advice and stuff... and with my parents... maybe more with mom... if I needed something, to go somewhere, then I would always ask dad... but now I talk a lot to mom too because dad works... I talk to mom about stuff... from problems to good things and so on...*

Two of the participants talk about the different status of the birth and foster child through two different perspectives: *...example... dinner – we're having grits and he's having bologna... then these kids would start screaming "I want some"... fine, if you're eating bologna, eat it somewhere where they can't see you (laughing), but these are little things, so... There are also reversed situations, such as the birth child's jealousy of the foster child: If it had been really bad, I wouldn't have stayed there... It wasn't so bad, but there were some bad aspects. One of them was that this friend of mine wasn't my friend anymore because she was very jealous of me. She felt that I was stealing her parents, and how could I do that?? She was jealous of me and I had nothing, no one?! She had parents and a house and a family and everything! These situations happened, for example, I went to a college prep school and I was always an A student, while she went to trade school and was a B student, so her parents always talked about me and said I was successful and a good student. It's not like I wanted that, they would just say it and she was upset, really jealous... that caused problems, rejection, disagreement and we weren't talking most of the time.*

Most of the participants also speak about being well accepted and equal to other children in the community and at school: *I never had problems in that respect, that I would have to explain things to someone. In essence, the kids knew, I wasn't in a position where I had to explain anything. When they asked why uncle and auntie, I never gave a specific answer. Not because I didn't want to, but because I didn't need to. Uncle and auntie explained the situation to the teachers, they told them all about it, but it was never perceived as something negative. No one really thought about it. They were my parents and that was that.;*

*People here accepted me as well. I know from experience that some children are, I can't say that I ever was, uncomfortable saying I was a foster child. It was even some kind of honor for me, a point of pride, and I notice that some children try to kind of hide it and keep it a secret. I liked it, I'm not ashamed of this family. This family was, I say it categorically, better than my own parents would have been.; ...I was lucky to be accepted here as well, by these kids, regardless of the fact that I was a stranger among them and they had been together since first grade, since kindergarten practically, they were all together and then I just appeared and they didn't reject me. I liked that and through my own behavior, I was always a little silly and a bit of a clown, so everyone liked me and I was also kind of small so I was easier to accept. The experience of their own status in school and in the community is also affected if foster care as a form of child care is well-known in the local community and accepted and if there are other cases. One participant explains it as follows: *Out of 34, some 20 of us were from families like that... at the school. There were no differences. We were all the same. I remember the teacher, it was totally normal at the time.**

One participant who does not have a negative attitude toward foster care or a negative experience still says, in relation to her own example: *In addition to being a foster child, you're also marked by poverty.*

The experience of their own status can also be recognized in the way that participants cope with certain problems in foster care. One girl had an experience of attempted sexual abuse by the foster parent, but did not report it because she felt that no one would believe her (*When something like that happens, people usually, you don't know what to do, how to react, who to talk to... they won't believe you, they'll say you're lying, that you're this and that... I don't know, you're the one coming from a family like that, and this... I mean... That's a problem.*), while another (experience of sexual harassment by the foster parents' son) did report it, only to meet with mistrust: *What bothered me the most was that no one wanted to believe me. You know, everyone was like... nothing, nothing was happening, and if it was, then it must be my fault. And even if it was my fault, I was a minor at the time. I mean, I was 12, you know. It was their responsibility to protect me. Even if I was asking for it, and really I wasn't.*

However, the fact remains that foster children, based on their age and understanding, try to be well-behaved and successful so that the foster family and the community would accept them. Although only several talk about it explicitly (*I tried, since it wasn't my house, to do my best to fit in, for them to like me. I mean, to be good.*), most of the participants' statements lead to this conclusion: *I went to a college prep school. I was an A student... In the beginning, when I first got there, no one knew me. So I was a good student... they hang around when some work needs to be done, you know, everyone wants to skate through with a good student, and I think that it was these competitions that saved me, I would compete in everything, academic subjects, handicraft, I always came first. In the county and then nationally and everyone would hang around and everything changed. Everyone wants to hang out with you and everything is different.;*

I'm not perfect, like some model, I just want to say the difference between me and her (younger sister). Because we can't all be the same even if we went through the same things. She was younger and she was their favorite. It bothered me at first, because she always got away with things by being younger, but then I sort of got over it and realized that I could make it on my own, I mean, she can't do things for me and I can't do things for her, I don't mean materially, everyone has to make their bed and lie in it, as they say.

As previously mentioned, the theme of **money** is occasionally present in the participants' stories as the basis for negative emotions of the child, vague relationships and contradictory messages, that is, it can indicate inequality of foster child status, for example: *I had to fend for myself. Sometimes I literally had torn shoes and wet feet. That was my experience. When mom could get some money, she helped, but I managed to get a student scholarship in the meantime, 500 kunas. It was better than nothing... It was because I was an A student and one lady told me about it. So I had some income. But it happened sometime that this money (1,600 kunas) would go to this girl (birth daughter of foster parents) to go shopping. I didn't get any of it.*

➔ 4 Characteristics of experience

Research participants talk about everyday life in foster care in different ways. Through **everyday activities and relationships**: *There wasn't anything specific that I had to do. It was up to me if I wanted to help with something, clean, I could just sit and watch TV. So I helped. I would feel stupid just sitting and watching her work. She taught me that, to clean something every day. Then we would go for coffee after lunch. I would always make lunch with her or bake cakes, always. Sometimes she would tell me to get out of her way, but I would always stand beside her and watch what she was doing. In the summertime we would go to Drava or the seaside. We watched TV in the evening. After everyone went to bed, we would sit in the kitchen and talk until two or three in the morning,* they also talk about their **experience of the entire situation** (*I felt fantastic*), about **specific events**, for instance, fear of disappointing the foster parents and shame over getting pregnant, some **advantages of foster care** that are not usually emphasized, e.g.: *the advantage of being poor and from a poor community is that you get other advantages (company, assistance) or early responsibility, independence, maturity, self-sufficiency, resourcefulness (I solved my problems myself, I never burdened others with my problems.),* about **ways of coping with vague and unprocessed memories and problems**: *Even with the help of a psychologist, I never remembered the real picture or real chronological memories. It was so painful and horrible that maybe... I'm not a reliable witness... that's how you could put it. I don't... I have huge gaps. I'm missing years...; It is what you believe it is. A person has to believe in something. If there are no people, you can believe in God.; Really... it really helped me a lot; ...I had to earn everything.*

Participants also often mention their **experiences with the social welfare centre/ social workers**. That is an unavoidable topic of any conversation about foster care. The experiences of the participants differ, not only in regard to others, but also in regard to their own experience through time, different relationships with individual professionals or different perspectives (e.g., positive experience with a social worker during foster care, followed later in life by negative experiences related to a project for help for women in distress). **Negative** experiences are generally related to the research participants' memories of relationships with social workers, insufficient contact, lack of interest and care for the children, for example: *They (the center) tested them (foster parents) rigorously, from finances, recommendations, everything, everything... to give me... I mean, they didn't even put me up for adoption... they placed me in foster care... they never once came, never asked anything... never asked: hey, where is that child? At the same time, they had some rigorous requirements... that's really irresponsible.; I think they came once during all these years... and not just for me, but for all of us.; Like I said, they were all promises at the centre, but nothing ever came of it. They would just send an order form for clothes sometimes, that was it, mostly she (foster mother) would buy everything... at first, they came a few times, not really later, like, you're fine here, we won't disturb you. Even better that they didn't come round, we had our peace. Because then they have a million questions and you don't know what to say. So, it was better that they didn't come, I was fine. They came a couple of times and saw I was doing ok, apparently, they knew they didn't have to come back.; No, they never came to check. They always said, if you want, you can come see them, but they never came, no. Only when auntie had problems with N. She would always disappear for a few days, I don't know, doing drugs. More things like that, but then they would come from the center and have a session with N. and only checked on the rest of us by the way. Otherwise, no. Not once, not here in Z., or in I., they never came. No.*

Older participants in particular emphasize **positive** experiences with their social workers, talk about them with satisfaction, as people they could really turn to for help, who were understanding, listened to the children, and even took chances by stepping out of legal and other boundaries in order to help a specific child according to their needs. They remember the social workers' names and it is not uncommon that they stayed in contact with them, at least until retirement. Some participants say: *...my social worker, who I still talk to, see, keep in touch with, she came to see me last year.; I mean, Š. is definitely one of the bright spots in our society.; My social worker at the centre was pretty fair and concerned, once a month, once a month. I see that all is in order, that all is fine, normal. If there were any problems, she would have come by more often, but when she saw that everything was fine all these years, she didn't come that much. So I felt that this person was also positive in a way.; It was a young social worker that focused on me and trusted me and bypassed the law. After my foster mother died, she let me live on my own and care for myself so that I wouldn't have to go to a home. I was a minor and, according to the rules, I should have ended up in a home. This M. came and said: it would be really difficult for you to go to a home from this environment, I know that, let's make a deal, I won't tell anyone that N. died and you have to maintain a 4.0 grade average, make sure the utilities are paid, you can't traipse around and you can't get caught, NOTHING can happen to you until you turn 18, which was in a year and one month.*

The descriptions/experiences/memories of the **first day in the foster family** are also very striking. With children who came to the foster family at the age of several years or more, memories are often very detailed. The participants usually even phrase it that way: *I remember that day very well. I know that everyone was waiting for me, uncle was at work, then he came home. They first took me to the room of S., auntie's daughter, I remember she had a closet full of teddy bears and dolls, she was in bed sick. I remember she gave me teddy bears and dolls when we played when I came. Around four, we went to get uncle, we even went to his sister's in S. They were all joking around that I must be his because I was ginger and he was a little ginger too. Then we went there and I know auntie stopped at a shop and bought tangerines and oranges and I didn't know what they were, I never had them before. She bought me all kinds of things. I spent a lot of time with them, we went all over.; I thought it was... nice. As soon as we came, there was a yard full of kids, because they thought it was unusual that they had their own kids and then they had more kids. Where did they get these kids... So we played in it was interesting for a few days. We didn't think at all.*

5 Participation in decision making

Participation in decision making is neither a simple nor unambiguous concept, as confirmed by the references (for example, Hart 1992), but also by insight into the statements of participants in this research. Participation in decision making can be identified in the research participants' statements in different areas and related to different ways and levels of participation, **in a continuum** ranging from not asking and not acknowledging to asking and acknowledging children's opinions. In terms of the possibility of children to participate in the decision about their separation from the family and placement in a home or foster family, experiences are varied. Naturally, they depend on the circumstances, but primarily on the child's age. In the case of younger children, their memories of the decision-making experience from the present position suggest that social workers implemented certain **strategies of "persuading" children to accept their decisions/choices**. Several examples indicate different memories and, most likely, different practices of including children in the decision-making process with professionals: *The police and the center asked me if I wanted to be placed in a family. I don't know, I said I wanted them to move me because I would be much better off than with my parents.; Of course, they asked at the center if I wanted to stay there and I accepted because that was my salvation. The only way out of this situation I was in. They kept extending this contract, the placement, and it was finally decided that I would stay there until I turned 18.; Basically, they didn't ask me if I wanted to stay with my grandmother... they... let me know, in a way, that I had to move. I mean, regardless of my relationship with my grandmother. It wasn't even a question of whether you wanted to, just, it would be best if you moved. Who knows what would have happened to me if I stayed there... so... I was the first to go along with it. I knew it would be better for me to get away, not so much because of the poverty, but... in general... the people, the village, the talk... so... I couldn't handle all of that.;*

Now... I don't remember that, but I remember that we all sat down together, my legal guardian and my social worker, so it wasn't, I'm not sure, we talked about everything, so it was probably mentioned, besides, when they brought out this book, we would give our impressions, what we liked and what we didn't like, we could say I got beaten because of so and so, and I don't know, I didn't get something or other, I need something, the guardian bough a television but didn't buy me a compass for math class, we could say all of that, but there wasn't anything like that.; I can't say they didn't ask me, because they did, that would be a lie. They did, they did. In a strange way, especially for a child, children are unsure, they'll do anything to please someone who... first they called all three of us brothers to talk together. Then one at a time. They thought we would be weaker like that, which made sense, after all. When there are three of you and one person says no, the other two fall in line. But it's a different story when you're alone, you're weaker. As soon as I saw that chocolate, I got in the car right away.

At a later age, participants show **proactiveness** in the making of some decisions and life choices. For example: *Yes, that was my choice. I mean, I... went to college... I was supposed to start my second year. I went there and withdrew... I withdrew and went to the center and said I'm not attending college anymore. I'm leaving. I got home, packed my things and auntie said – fine, that's your choice, if that's what you want and that was that. All in one day...; I had this friend that I went to. She said that she, that is, her parents would help me and I went there. I asked my friend myself for her family to take me in – so they (center) asked me... If I wanted to stay with her... If I had anyone... somewhere else to go, another foster family, people who are already registered as foster parents. But I said... it was easier to move in with her because I already knew her and everything. At least I knew someone. So I suggested I could stay with this friend of mine. Of course, they talked to the parents and it was... like a short examination so they could see if they could place me there, but I stayed there until I completed my education, high school. Basically, with her parents. It wasn't a family that fostered kids otherwise, it was through my friendship.* After the death of his foster mother, one young man suggested to his foster father that they part ways: *I mean... it's better we part ways, it will be easier on both of us... maybe not, we'll see. Maybe it was a normal move for that situation... I contacted Mrs. P. myself, she was my social worker, and I told her exactly what I... what we decided, not just me. Ultimately, it was my wish to go back (to the children's home).* The example of our next participant is also very illustrative: *After that, I went to a foster family when I was 12 and I stayed with the first foster family for three years. I didn't feel good there and I asked for a change of placement and went to another foster family. I also stayed there for three years and then I was supposed to go to college. When I made that decision, I decided to come to Zagreb, meaning I couldn't stay with my old foster family. So I went with auntie to Zagreb to find new accommodation. Me and auntie found a family in Zagreb that registered as a foster family only for me and I stayed with them for three years as well. After that, I decided that I wanted to become independent and I moved out to live on my own. I lived in an apartment for one year. Then I moved to a student dorm to see what that was like and then I moved in with Lj. And that was that.*

The choice of school/college often depends on the possibilities of the family and community, but also respect for children's wishes for continued education. Meanwhile, **participation in everyday choices/decisions** was an area where research participants identified a nearly total possibility of participation and acknowledgement for their opinions: *We could work everything out, she would make a suggestion and if I agreed, fine, and if not, she would ask my opinion. We always came to an agreement, we didn't argue.*

The biggest issue with participation in decision making is identified by the participants with regard to social welfare centers, that is, professional social workers: *So, only when the police came, that's when services came; so, when the police were on the way... essentially, no one listened to me.; I also contacted social services and asked (about the adopted sister and brother)... but I was met with such resistance... I mean... it's hard to explain. Why do you ask, what do you care... Quite rudely, after all. But, life is long, there's plenty of time for getting acquainted. We're all going to be adults and it might be easier, the subject wasn't discussed much. The subject... when you ask about it, it's like... you have no right. Which is really sad, a disaster. I think that's a violation of human rights! Well done to social services and the state and all that, but this type of thing isn't really... justified by any moral criteria.; At first I said, you know, when I could see after three months that it wasn't working out, that I didn't feel good there, that I wasn't ok, I went to the center and said that I wanted to move and they said they had to do a field visit and see with them what's going on and then they would decide what could be done. But no one ever came and in three years I went to the center and said, listen, I'm not staying there anymore even if I have to live in the street... I'm not going back there. Then they were lucky that M. was available and they were like, fine, pack your things and we'll pick you up this afternoon and take you to another family.; When did that happen? There was no participation in the decision. They all try to get you to agree, you go check out the family. If you like it, you stay, if not, you go back. When I said no, they were like no, no. You're staying. I mean, you don't have any say in it.*

➔ 6 The birth family from the participants' perspective

The birth family has already been discussed in the first chapter regarding the reasons for separation of the child from the family. However, the birth family is always and permanently present for children, in their thoughts and everyday life. Naturally, the experiences are very varied, as are the participants' attitudes to these experiences and family members. Some participants do **not know their parents or have very little information about their birth family** (*My father's background was bothering me a little. I only wanted to know who my father was, but the foster mother couldn't work it out. She couldn't work it out. Because my mother wouldn't tell me who my father was. So there was no way she would tell my foster mother. It couldn't be done. That's the only thing I regret.; I heard something like he (father) was from Lika, Slavonija, whatever.; In high school, for my 17th or 18th birthday, my social worker organized for me to see my mother one time. I never saw her again before or after. I can't say I wouldn't be interested.;*

My birth grandmother showed me that he's listed as my father... she said there were three people who could be my father... I mean, what a horrible story.) Some participants have no exact information about whether certain individuals are their siblings or half siblings (*Mom said that I have other birth brothers... it doesn't say for him, he's a little darker... And little brother was pretty different from the beginning. Mom says he was sicklier and so on, but more like dad. A different character, not good in school, but...*).

Consequently, some of the participants still experience confusion, uncertainty, unsolved situations and unknowns with regard to their birth family and their own background or identity, which still represents, as shown by the above statements, a certain emotional and psychological burden for these individuals.

Some of the participants assess their relationships with birth family members as:

- **good, important, close**, especially the relationships with their siblings. For example: *Honestly, that was one of the best periods, we felt good, we were together, thinking... We had all kinds of different ideas, we could do this, we could do that... We were the most successful, we passed exams, it was a competition* (with the brother).
- **correct** (*I stay with her at the seaside every summer. We talk regularly, once every week or two. But these are hour-long conversations – how I'm doing, how she's doing, how's work, how's school, how's my sister, her common-law husband... because they never got married.*)
- through **occasional contacts and meetings**: *There was five of us, there's only two of us left, the rest are deceased. My sister is the eldest, we talk rarely, she calls if she needs something.*
- through **different relationships with individual family members**. For example: *...she was, in a way, the bright spot in that story... so, she came around once a month, when she got her paycheck, both of them worked in the lumber industry. She would come visit us, but my father came only once.; With my grandmother, yes, I would go home on weekends, but with my mom, rarely. Usually when the two of us would meet somewhere or if I went there, it would end with an argument. So I avoided that.; Yes, with my brother, I love him and he loves me, the biggest thing we have from each other is that we know the truth. Like... you know when puppies huddle together in a downpour? That's us! That's how I feel...*
- through **discomfort and avoidance of contact**: *At first, when they placed me, they said they would come see me every other weekend and I would visit over summer break. I went once over school break, I left around noon and I called auntie to come get me at four. They never came to see me, or visit, nothing.*
- through **bad memories**: *They say I was three years old. Some woman came and said she was my mom. I remember hiding under the table... I don't remember, I feel like I remember with my head, but not my soul or emotions. That's what I'm missing. Anyway, mom visited occasionally and took me for weekends sometimes... I remember being immensely sad to leave N., it was horrible at my mom's, she beat me, she... it was horrible... bad memories of contacts with my mother, mother hit me, she was rough... it's easier to live with the knowledge that your parent is sick than evil, it was horrible.*

- through **unacceptance** of birth parents: *Truth be told, I never had much contact with my parents. I can't say there was any resentment on my part, but there was definitely disinterest. I didn't want to see them or anything else. Because you feel abandoned in a way, I have a relationship with them, but I can't say as parents, I don't see them as parents. They're there, but... for me and for all of us (brothers), that's not the real thing... I see them as neighbors, we can have some coffee, talk a little, listen, help out, why not, but I'll never see them as parents and that's that.*

Relations with the birth family also **change** over a longer time period, due to information processing, achieving insight, rationalization, or due to changed circumstances. For example: *I mean, I went there too (stepfather's), but not as much, of course. Especially when the stepfather was away, that's when I went. And mom came and I saw my brothers and sisters. However... the relationship with mom was good. I blamed her for the situation to a point because I couldn't understand how something like that could happen to me, why I had to go through all of that... I mean, my entire childhood, since I was three or four until I was 14. I really suffered through it. Daily beatings and abuse. Different kinds of harassment... Watching your mom get beaten and abused and things like that. Then, abuse from these half brothers and sister, of course, under his instruction. These kids would say all these things to me, insult me. Like, I don't know... I couldn't eat with them at the table because they told me, and they were six years younger, these little kids could tell me... you can't eat with us because our dad bought that. That's just one example. Mom is divorced from this stepfather now. He doesn't live at the house anymore. Of course, that's why I can go there. We have a good relationship. After all these years... they were kids, it wasn't their fault. We're trying to work everything out now, erase those bad memories. So that we can all forgive each other. It's a healthy relationship.* In the case of some participants, this altered relationship shifted **toward taking care** of members of the birth family as an adult, after termination of foster care. In this regard, one participant describes his situation as follows: *It is a little strange that we take care of him, and not he of us... I help them financially because my father got this inheritance, and my brother is unemployed... Unfortunately, my sister is divorced, so it's difficult for her as well... I have nephews, they visit for three days every other week... I had pretty bad contact with my mom, but now she's older and sick, like on a mental level, I don't want to say mentally ill, because she can take care of herself, she has her own direction, and you can nudge all you want, but she always goes the way she wants. She can't be influenced, I tried and my sister too, in every kind of way and now there's no other solution but to see with social services about placing her somewhere.*

Particularly interesting are several stories about not knowing one or both birth parents and the determination of children at a certain age to **find their parents on their own**. These experiences are varied, but always very emotionally loaded, to this day: *I met my dad when I was 18. The day before prom night... I don't want to talk about it.; I felt some kind of fear. Some kind of discomfort and I wanted to give up because I was afraid of how my mom would react. And I remember that I was gathering my courage when I saw this policeman in the street and I told him about my problem in short, that I want to see my mother and that I knocked on the door and that I'm sort of afraid and uncertain. And the policeman said he would help, he was very obliging, he said he would take me to my mom's and knock on the door.*

And he knocked and my mom came out and the policeman just said “My part of the job is done, now it’s your turn.” And so I told my mom, as they say, straight to the point, I called her ma’am, I didn’t have the courage to say mom. I said, ma’am, you can guess who I am? And she sort of looked down, she couldn’t look me in the eye, this type of communication with people, I guess because of shame or I don’t know what, it was emotional, and she said, looking at the ground “Yes, you’re my son.”; It’s incredible physically... pins and needles... your teeth are on edge, oh dear, AAAAH, one step away from a heart attack... and he says: YES? (deep voice), all agitated, he was, like, kind of arrogant... THAT’S ME (deep voice), the master of the universe. I said – I’m A. Yes, and? And I could already see it – Go away! So I said – Don’t worry, I don’t need anything from you, I just came to see if you were my father, but seeing how fat and ugly you are, you’re definitely not my father. No way! And I knew that he was, but I had to say something obnoxious! And some swearwords to boot and I went outside, slammed the door and ran down the hallway all driveling and crying... maybe I was already crying inside, but that’s when I realized I was really driveling, I remember slowing down, the hallway was really long, through the entire building. It might not really be that long, but to me it seemed to go on forever! So... I was slowing down and hoping he would come out and he did and he hurried after me... and so... we went to this dive called... I don’t know... just to the right... we sat down, I cried...

One of the participants talks about **losing his brother and sister due to her adoption** and unsuccessfully trying to obtain information about them at the social welfare centre: *Two brothers are older, one 11 months and one three years, and I only saw my younger sister and brother when they were young, they were placed in a family, all of us were in a children’s home very briefly, I clearly remember the situation when this younger brother and sister **went for a walk with one of the educators and never came back**. We knew right away, you feel it, that connection... And we were asked some questions, like do you want to leave the home and go to a family and things like that, but none of us wanted to go, because of this connection... they were gone and we lost all trace... in that respect. I went and asked about them, they told me we couldn’t have this information because of some rules... you just know they’re not coming back, especially since we didn’t really care for this educator that took them... it’s hard to explain, but we knew that something was going on, that they wouldn’t be back.*

Participants mention all members of the family, immediate, extended (*It was great having an uncle. My uncle would always jump in and buy everything I needed.*) and substitute, indicating that the family network is important to them due to feelings of belonging, but also future relationships, as they frequently use them to supplement their, often sparse, social network. Some have contact and are on good terms with the wife and children of their late father, although they never lived together, or with half-brothers who grew up in different places, often with the birth mother. The birth family was, and still is, an important subject, both in their thoughts and reality. However, situations differ and those who maintain good relationships with the foster parents do not give much thought to the birth family and only have occasional contact, while those who do not presently have a wide social network feel a greater need for knowledge of and contact with members of the immediate and extended birth family.

➔ 7 The foster family from the participants' perspective

This is the most comprehensive theme and can be approached in a variety of ways. Although participants in this research were placed in various forms and types of foster care (kinship, placement with an older woman who did not meet foster parent requirements, foster care with the characteristics of adoption that could not be realized due to the mother's rights), and regardless of their, sometimes negative, experiences with their own foster family, they exhibit a **positive attitude** toward their own placement in foster care, as well as the concept of foster care in general. The existence of certain negative experiences is not considered by the participants so problematic as to outweigh positive aspects of foster care, as well as the recognized advantages of living in a foster family. Participants state the following about life in a foster family, **experience** of the family and experience of themselves within the family: *It's an understatement to say it was great. Fulfilling. The entire time, I felt like they were my real parents who treat their children normally. They were my parents and that's the end of it.; I'm their child... they see me as their son... for as long as I want. I'm 21, I study part-time, my sister owns a business, I'm employed in that business. Me, my sister and my dad work together.; I think that I had something they were missing. I really had everything, primarily love. As they say, a warm embrace.; I felt comfortable, I don't know, there was this initial rebellion about not being with my parents. I felt comfortable, it wasn't like anyone, I don't know... how can I put it... denied or forbade me something. It was clear what was allowed and what wasn't, I didn't want for anything... so, there was no separation... even the mother and father of this lady accepted us like their own grandchildren even though we weren't.*

Several of the participants perceive their foster family completely as their own family, have strong feelings of **security, belonging and acceptance** and some of them still (after turning 18) live with or near the foster parents (even if they have started their own family) and maintain regular contact. In this way, the foster family becomes a source of **continued support and security for the future**, i.e. a **family for life**. Here are some participant statements: *The placement was officially terminated in '88, but me and my brother stayed with the lady for another five years, to become independent. She gave us a building plot right next to them and even helped us build half our house after we became independent, then we moved to this new house and definitively left the family in '93. But we're still in touch. We lived 50 meters away, like brothers and sisters. They worked it all out really well. We keep in touch to this day because the daughters, one is 48 and the other 55, we're in touch and we're still neighbors and we visit each other and go to birthdays, parties, stuff like that. I mean, there's still a connection.; It's great that she does everything through a pedagogical approach, cooks, does everything. So, I'm just really glad that she's slowly reaping the benefits, she earned it... for now, we have a pretty nice set up. Dad has passed away. Mom is still alive, thank God, and very much a contributing member of our community.* In some stories, as seen previously, there are indications of **feelings of gratitude** toward the foster parents and, with older participants, also **feelings of responsibility** for the foster parents in their older age. Also, participants frequently state: *I was lucky or really lucky, great fortune, to be placed in such a good family or I got the perfect family*, then draw parallels with the birth family.

In every instance, **the foster family is more positive than the birth family and the experience of foster parents is more positive than the experience of birth parents** (*I loved her more than my own mother.; We see each other quite often. I visit him a lot, we talk... We have a good relationship. Basically, I have a better relationship with him than with my parents who, truthfully, I see and are in a better life situation.*).

It is interesting to note that our participants' children perceive their parents' foster parents as grandparents. In some cases, even the birth parents have a good relationship with the foster parents, even after the child is grown up. One participant states: *My foster father's sister is my half-sister's godmother and I'm the godfather of my foster father's sister's son... so, his nephew... so... really decent... they're in touch... not as much as we are... but still... birthdays, Christmas, Easter, they would come down sometimes... less often now as they're getting older... really decent.*

Participants talk frequently about a **good relationship**, which appears to be the basic measure of their experience of the foster family. Although they largely talk about inclusion in the foster family, acceptance by all family members, as well as those outside the family, there is a certain difference in the experiences of the foster mother and the foster father, whereby they describe a particularly good, close and warm relationship with the foster mother. They often call the foster mother mom, but they call the foster father uncle and less frequently dad (*We called the lady mom, and the foster father uncle.; I didn't (call the foster mother mom), but I accepted her, that whatever she said was right, that she wouldn't teach me anything wrong, which would not have happened if I had stayed with my family.; I still spend the most time with her to this day, a wonderful woman... she was my, I don't know, we had a good relationship, every evening she would say "good night child."; I can't describe the feeling. Wonderful. Like I said, I considered her to be my mom. I was safer, but when they said that she accepted it, signed for custody, I was even safer. Then I felt even more love for her.; Auntie meant the most to me, I saw her first and I loved her the most. It's not that I didn't love the others, I loved them all. I would say she was my other mom.; ...it so happened that we just clicked, I was a great baby and I made great progress... and she was, like, totally in love with me. At least that's what the neighbors said.; She was shy and a very good woman. Sensitive. Humble... I mean, a real mother... even more than that. Everything was focused on one thing and that was me. I got different things from him, it was a guy thing. I spent a lot of time with him, fixing tractors, he was a mechanic, stuff like that, I was interested in that, we were always fixing something. He provided that masculine aspect... strength, toughness. She provided more the other aspect so, in the end, I got a lot from both.*).

The fact that these are lasting and good relationships is evidenced by the following statements of research participants: *I still remember how hard it was to go, my heart almost stopped. I didn't stay long, maybe half an hour, I didn't have the strength. We didn't know what to say, I felt embarrassed, she felt embarrassed. We looked at each other with tears streaming down own faces. So, I went a few times and then we made up. I mean, she forgave me. I messed up, it was my fault, what can I say. We learn from our mistakes.*

One participant does not have a positive opinion of her foster family because it **reminded her of her birth family**, although it was significantly less severe (*The foster father drank, he would raise his voice, I was afraid, although I had a normal life there most of the time.*). This could be an instance of foster care as secondary trauma, where the foster family shares similar characteristics with the birth family that the child had to leave precisely because of these traumas. Although, it should be noted that even this participant states that she benefited from this placement, that it was her *salvation*, etc., or, as she says, *the good outweighed the bad*. However, the fact remains that some families are not suitable for foster care, especially since we know that these children are traumatized. As one participant phrases it: *People who foster children should be thoroughly examined by professionals who can identify the condition these people are in, their views, opinions. To check if this family has a healthy, normal family life that includes normal things that are good for children, both their own and foster children. To understand that the child comes from a devastated family and needs to be given love and affection, and not to be repressed in some way, that's what... The foster parents should get tested and investigated so these situations wouldn't happen. That's the most important thing. Because the consequences of these people and their family relationships being unstable... Some arguing is normal, but to throw someone out?! I mean, they had a fight once and we all had to leave the house because he got drunk and started smashing around the house.*

Participants list a number of **benefits** from living in a foster family. While these have been mentioned previously, more as an entire experience, below we elaborate some concrete benefits specific for individual areas or stages of life.

Participants mention the following:

- *I received a good upbringing that I can apply to my own children.*
- *I became more mature than my peers, I learned a lot.*
- *I think I was brought up better than my peers who lived with their own families.*
- *I was given all the material things, they gave me everything I wanted.*
- *I finished my education. That was thanks to auntie. It was phenomenal there, I felt like a new person, I had everything I wanted.*
- *The benefits were not growing up in an institution, so I know what a lap is, I know what reading stories is, I know N. was ALL MINE... she was all mine. I didn't share a lap with 20 others. And... this enormous amount of love that she gave me. Maybe, it's clear in my case that I would have gone crazy if I stayed with my mom, this feeling that the world is a safe place because that is very important for self-confidence, she washed stairs and I realized there were ways to make money. That was a good life lesson.*
- *I think that I saw something that I liked in every family, something I would apply to my family. Also something that I didn't like and I don't think is good and wouldn't.*
- *We got something from both, these (first foster family) got us to our feet, let's say, and those (second foster family) continued, didn't derail us.*
- *It helped me a lot. I raise my children the way that auntie raised me and the way her daughter raised her daughter, and still raises. It helped me a lot.*

The participants occasionally point out **negative aspects of foster care**, naturally, in relation to their own experience: *The negative aspects of foster care are old people who die soon and you lose this only family that you ever had... it's gone. That's very sad.; Being broke is a bad aspect of foster care.*

Participants that lived in more than one foster family describe the **differences** between them (e.g. three foster families that one participant lived with): *How were they different. Mostly these relationships in the family. They were always fighting, always having problems. You know, it wasn't any kind of real problems, but they made such a big deal out of every little thing, and they kicked their kids out, then they took them back in, a really rotten situation. And at auntie's, everything was nice, normal, you could have a normal conversation. All of the relationships were closer, warmer, better, that was the main difference between them.*

Almost all of the participants (except for the girl placed in her friend's family at her own suggestion) would **recommend their foster family to others**, which is clearly indicative of their opinion of the family and satisfaction with the foster family.

➔ 8 The participants' recommendations

The research participants' recommendations branch out in several directions.

Recommendations for social welfare centers are related to methods of **selecting, preparing and assisting foster families**, motivations for fostering, as well as conditions, family relations, family situation and supervision before and during placement. This theme is present throughout the participants' stories, sometimes from their own experiences or the experiences of others or their reflections on foster care from their current perspective:

- *The center should supervise foster parents more.*
- *I would first make some kind of, I'm no expert, bust some kind of psychological profile for each individual child... but also, let's say, their parents' case study to examine the reason why these children should be separated from their family and if there is a possibility of rehabilitating the parents so the children wouldn't have to be separated... they should have a rationale for these children because of possible later side effects... In any event, parents should come first, then a foster family, and then a home – this should be the hierarchy.*
- *Foster parents should be educated, selected, better selected, maybe... target people who have a normal family situation and run a campaign to reach normal people who could do this. Reach those of us who used to be in foster care... we know very well what it's like, maybe form a small department at the center, at least one person in every center to deal exclusively with foster care. For instance, to have a mediator if a parent is visiting their child in foster care, that can be very difficult. I'm living proof... you need to have a number of professionals to mediate at these times; there are a lot of families that could be parents, they just need to be reached... you need to advertise, have a campaign that's not just for those of us who are already in the system!*

- *It's important for children to have a warm meal.*
- *That country living, I would recommend that. I like it better. I notice with the kids, when I drive kids, I see when they get out of the car when they come to a rural family, they start running around, looking around, they ask where's the doggy, where's the kitty, where's the piggy. Children still see it that way today.*
- *These professional teams should really work a lot with potential foster parents and there should be a lot of education. I don't know, I'm not very well informed on how it's done today, it probably usually goes through the Ministry. If the Ministry has this vision, they should also work on the potential family being well prepared. I think there should be no secrets. I think everything should be clear, exactly what the child is like, to warn them, listen, there could be this kind of problem, that kind of problem.; I think the center has some other mechanisms. For example, they can go to school and see how these children are doing. If they're working together with schools, they could do it in other ways too. Yes, yes. Ok, fine, you can't do that in a big city, I don't know, maybe if centers had monthly meetings of some kind. Meetings for foster children, that would be nice. You know, like those support groups where they could talk about, I don't know, the good and the bad sides. That wouldn't be bad.*

Recommendations for social welfare centers related to **methods of communication with children**, respecting children, relationships, care, contacts, even **children's rights**, **i.e., working in the best interest** of the child:

- *It's important to ask children about placement.*
- *It's not ok for them to... check in once a year... I mean, for more children... god forbid just for one... so, they should come a few... they should check in once every two months.*
- *Focus should be on the children, not adults.*
- *One of the solutions is going back to a home. If they're in a family and don't feel good, for instance... Maybe ask the child, talk to him, see what he would like. And then move in that direction...*
- *Actually, they would come to the house sometimes, in the beginning... I mostly went to the center. I mean, even if they had come, they wouldn't have found anything... You know, these are things that should be better in a foster family, I would say, yes, I'm fine. And I was, but I wasn't... You know... how could I tell her... what would happen then? They would ask them... and what would happen to me? They would attack me... they wouldn't believe me, they would say I was lying... Maybe if there was some communication and I could say something so they would know, but not tell the family right away, or get me out of there first and then do with them whatever they wanted. So that I wouldn't have even more negative consequences. I mean, they should... in my opinion... this money that they get... it's not a lot of money and the foster parents don't even have to spend it all on the children. They should use some of it to pay for food and everything else. But the center should have insight into what the child gets from these foster parents, for instance, every month. Besides regular meals. Did these children get shoes... Of course, that should be very much taken into account. The mental state of the foster parents and monitor how the child is doing there. To constantly talk to them, monitor them. Someone experienced who knows their job.*

- *Work with the birth children, because they can feel like someone is trying to steal their parents. That's why you need to work with them as well, communicate, have a workshop for them so they can understand that this child is not there to steal their parents...*
- *To inform these children somehow, encourage them, stimulate... because these are often children with low self-esteem, children who blame themselves, who probably suffer humiliation and disdain from friends and parents. They need to be encouraged towards something good, directed somehow. Told that it's not over, that it's not finished, that they can still get out of it, that there is help, people who want to help them... it's important to know that there's someone in the world who can help you. Usually you can't see from all this gloom you're in, you can't see a way out or anyone that could help you, but it's important for children to know this! That they can be helped and directed towards something good. To explain to them clearly what is allowed and what is not and to have someone to talk to in every situation. A professional. Love is the most important thing of all. If this child doesn't have anyone to treat them with love. It doesn't have to be birth parents, it can be someone... who does their job with love and wants to help this child, if the child doesn't get love from anyone, they won't succeed. You can get love... how can I put it... it's not important who, it's important someone loves you, someone cares about you, even this social worker who asks how you're doing, hugs you, tells you something nice. That's really a nice thing to do for these children because they are so hurt... It's, it's... enormously painful... enormously.*
- *Gradual introduction. Well, they definitely need to, like, get acquainted first. You have to get acquainted with the family and them with you, and then you can see if it could work. So a child can tell you if he doesn't like it, that he couldn't stay there.*
- *I never heard from young children that it's bad for them. They really enjoy it, while older children seem to have different experiences. So, maybe there are more negative experiences than positive and the negative are more negative from the aspect of these professionals. For example, whenever you ask about social workers, it's pretty bad. It gets better with foster parents, you know. So, I think experiences are more positive with foster parents and really negative with the centers. The center sees you as a number, right. I mean, you come there and they all have a job to do, they want to get rid of you as soon as possible and that's it. Or they're too busy, so you have to come again and again.*
- *Kinder, friendlier, make it less, you know. It's always pretty cold, kind of grudging. Yeah. To socialize with you, do stuff with you. I thought it was a terrible comment, when I went with the girls to M. when we were working at K., me and the girls were talking how terrible it is at the centre for those that come from homes to Zagreb to go to college and they have to worry about accommodation and food and everything for school. And of course that 2000 kunas is not enough, especially if you can't get into a dorm. So then they have to come for onetime assistance, for books, clothes... I mean, they tell them things like: 'I recently went to college too, I worked and went to school, why do you need assistance, get a job.' I mean, first of all, if you do get a job, and they find out at the center, they'll block the money and pay you out from what you're doing. And secondly, what do they care. You have that right, you're legally entitled to that right.*

- *The Forum was good because it was independent from the centers in a way, if the centers are not interested in helping you, I thought Forum was really great, and that Igra Association. You know, because I found out what my rights are.; I don't know if the problem is that these ladies have worked at the center for so many years and they're numbed, or... M. and I went to the center because of finances and... they treat you like a number, like they're their own reason for existing... but they're not, they're not... They don't focus on us, but some paperwork, a job from eight to four... it should be a calling. They should hire people who can feel empathy, who get the cross-section of society, who know what's possible...*

Recommendations related to **changes in legislature, changes in the concept of foster care**: *Enable faster adoption of a child.; One call in three months is child care!?!; If the state is starting this process, they should assist kids and foster parents more from this financial aspect because a well-raised child who continues their education and maintains contact with foster parents and has a family will get further... bottom line, it's more financially viable for the state to have a highly educated person than to toss them out at 18.; For whoever's responsible here, this Minister of Social Welfare, to pay more attention to these families so it doesn't come down to: here's a receipt, you paid for this, take the receipt there and you'll get your money, next. I mean, to put these people who do this on a higher level.*

Recommendations for **alternative forms of foster care** arise from the current situation of the participants. For example, one participant who misses her family and whose foster mother passed away says: *Me and my son are looking for foster grandparents.* The participants from this subsample advise foster children to **remain steadfast and strong and to continue their education.**

9 Other themes

During the analysis of the interviews with participants from this subsample, many additional themes were identified, some of which have been incorporated in the preceding text (for example, the topic of alternative interventions), while below we elaborate only two most frequently mentioned. The themes are related to the participants' success and examining differences between a home and a foster family.

The need for being successful as a strategy for achieving acceptance, better status, self-affirmation and self-reliance occurs with all of the participants in a variety of different ways. This theme was previously discussed from the perspective of the experience of foster child status, while here the emphasis is on the focus on self in the future, the realization that they are on their own and must be independent and self-reliant and perceive education and success as means of achieving this goal: *I mean, for example, that's the reason that the foster family was great for me. I really applied myself at school, when before I didn't care if I got Cs or As. Although I was a B student and, my last year in the home, an A student.*

When I was in the family, it was really important for me to be an A student. I had this security at the home, but when I got to the family, this security was gone. It was like, when you're done with school, where will you go then? You can't stay with the family, only go back to the birth family where you have nothing. I could go back to my family... It was in my best interest to do the best I could, so I could get a job someday, to make my own way somehow, while I never thought about that at the home. I mean, you get everything at the home. I never had to fight for anything because I had more than I needed. And in a family, you have to.

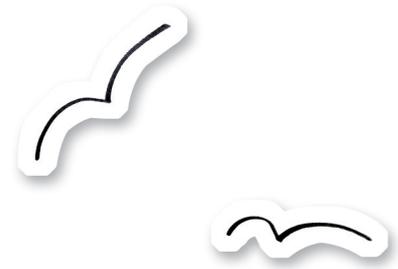
The differences between a foster family and a children's home are a frequent theme. Some see a problem in the injustice that young people have to leave the home because of their age and they have no place to go. One participant believes that young people at homes should start being prepared and guided for eventually leaving much earlier.

- *It's really nice in a home, the conditions are fantastic. I've been working at a children's home for 23 years, but I do see that difference. There is a difference. A family, family life over life in the home. I see it's different. The educator, for example, has eight to ten children in her group. There's no way that she doesn't have a favorite in the group who is singled out from the others. Of course, the other children can see that. They have to see it, I see it in homes every day. I noticed that when a new child comes, the new child is always coddled a little in the first month. Because you know that something was off if they ended up here. Other children see this, they say, auntie, why are you making a fuss over him all the time. I still think that children in a family get more attached to the family than a child does to their educator. I don't know. That's where I see a difference.*
- *You have all these professionals at the home, but when you come to a family, you don't have, for starters, all of these material means like at the home, because at the home, you have absolutely everything. You're a child from a children's home and wherever you go, you don't have to pay for anything, you go on all the trips, you go to the seaside, you go skiing, you go to Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Netherlands. I mean, you can't do that in a family, you know. Materially, you have everything. The rooms at the home are really well appointed, everything is new, you get new clothes, all this great stuff, materially, great. And the other thing is, you're coming from, I don't know, I came from a poor family and my mother was ill, and the other thing is if you have some sort of trauma or something, the family doesn't know how to deal with you, they don't know how to handle you, for example, I think it's really hard for this family to communicate with your birth family and that's different at a home. You accept the home for your own and you don't accept the family because you already have a family. Everyone wants to look at pictures with you and talk about their family. And when you come to a family, you mostly hear about that family and you share their memories and yours are sort of neglected. So, I don't know, when it comes to relationships, somehow I liked it better at the home.*
- *On the whole, from this perspective, they're very positive (experiences at the home). Because, in a way, we're men today, all three of us. With positive attitudes. It's not that it was easy. Especially at times... You know, there's one person for 20 of us and it's hard to get things that you would get in a family, positive. The negative is that you're stigmatized and deprived, when you come to a home, people see you as... People can't tell the difference between a reformatory and a children's home.*

Summary

In terms of learning and understanding the participants' perspective on their experience in foster care from a certain time distance, as young people and middle-aged individuals, it can be stated that, in the broadest sense, their experience, perception and attitude toward the concept of foster care as help for children without adequate parental care is positive. The participants' experiences and reflections on foster care also indicate a number of aspects of foster care which should be rethought, modified, improved, bettered. This especially applies to suggestions addressed to social welfare centers related to the selection and supervision of foster parents, their education and assistance in everyday life. It also applies to a need for professionals to set up different methods of caring for foster children and communicating with them. This participant subsample also points out the need and possibility for going beyond formal regulations in individual cases. Their experiences have shown that it is in the child's best interest and necessary more than ever (as it has been at a very low level so far) to acknowledge more the interests and perspectives of children, and less those of the adults. Numerous recommendations were also provided regarding the age of the foster parents, location of foster families, ways of motivating suitable individuals for foster care, etc. There can be no doubt that the participants of this research are individuals with experience, but also interest in children who are in the same situation that they were once in of having to leave their own family and being entrusted in the care of a foster family or an institution. This is why they wish to share their experiences and thoughts with those in the child care system, so that the wrong choices of adults would not be repeated in other cases. They are aware that their experience of foster care has influenced their worldview and made them useful to the community by means of their advice, but also concrete assistance related to some segment of foster care.

4.2 Thematic Analysis of Data from All Participant Groups



A thematic analysis was conducted with the purpose of combining messages from all of the participants regarding key themes, identified on the previous level of analysis, and summarizing them to the level of important common messages from all research participants, while still retaining their authenticity and diversity. Consequently, this chapter provides summarized results of the analysis of key themes.

➔ 1 Understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family

An analysis of data gathered from all groups of research participants related to the theme of understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family indicates two key elements or dimensions described more or less in the same way or expressed in some other way by all research participants. These are: **understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family with expression of acceptance of the decision for separation and the emotional relationship to that event and circumstances.**

Understanding of reasons for separation from the birth family with expression of acceptance of the decision for separation is related to knowing and understanding the past of the family. Therefore, the age of the child at the time of the separation was found to be very important for the understanding of reasons for separation and acceptance of that decision. Older age, or separation from the family at elementary school age, allows the child, adolescent or adult to rely on their own memories, assessments, experiences, conclusions and decisions, while younger age (separation at preschool age) makes children “dependant on other people’s stories,” or the existence of an individual who is willing to talk about and even investigate with the child what happened in the family. In general, research participants were able to elaborate their understanding of the reasons for separation even when this understanding was formulated through indirect experiences (recollections and stories of others). Specific reasons most frequently cited by the participants include **neglect and abuse by the parents, father’s alcoholism, violent and other unacceptable behavior of the parents, poverty, illness and death of one or both parents.** Statements and descriptions of this nature occurred in conversations with participants from all groups: *Our mother abandoned us and then our father as well.; My dad was killed in a car accident. I lived with just my mom for a while... and now... aaah... mom got cancer and aaah... mom died.;* *There was abuse and alcohol, things like that... My father abused me, he drank constantly, every day, it was unbearable, he came at me with a knife...*

The participants rarely speak directly about whether it was important to them and how much they understand the reasons why they were separated from their family. This fact is usually related to the acceptance of the separation and coming to terms with the new form of accommodation, which research participants from all groups perceived as a better solution than remaining with their own family. There are relatively few cases where the reasons for separation from the family were unknown or unclear. Even in such cases, participants talk about difficult family situations and describe their experiences related to these situations. It should also be noted that the birth children of foster parents also show a clear understanding of the reasons for separation of children from their family. They formed their understanding through the experiences of foster children and were focused on expressing sympathy with the foster children in their family.

Understanding of reasons for separation from the family is the initial step in the integration of difficult life experiences in one's own life story. Although children and professionals refer to more or less the same reasons for separating a child from the family, the children's perspective should not be disregarded. In terms of data obtained through this research, the evaluation of the reasons by foster children is retrospective. We should especially take into account how children experience separation and reasons for separation from the family at the time (immediately before and after) of the separation. Naturally, not only for the purpose of research, but primarily for the purpose of planning and improving the child's life situation during separation, as well as later in life.

In summarizing findings about the understanding of reasons for separation from the family, we also noted the significance of the involvement of members of the child's natural social network (grandmother, neighbor, teacher) in the process of separation as people who warned social services about the need for an intervention, thereby facilitating the child's understanding and acceptance of the separation. This fact was evidenced in particular by the descriptions from the foster adolescent and adult groups. It should also be noted that the conversation with the interviewers often enabled research participants to clarify their life situation to themselves, also with regard to the theme of understanding reasons for separation.

It is logical and expected for the relationship of research participants to the topic of separation from their family to be emotionally loaded. Emotional involvement can be recognized on two levels. In terms of describing understanding of reasons for separation from the family, it ranges from sadness and anger to indifference. Younger participants generally describe their emotional behavior (*I just cried...*), while adolescents and adults talk about the memories of their emotional state (*I was a little sad...; I thought it was a little unusual...*). Emotional involvement appears to have enabled participants to stay in touch with this part of their life experience and describe it. Consequently, their heightened emotional involvement was noticeable during the interviews and their pain and sadness were apparent through their speech and non-verbal communication.

The distinguishing feature of participants who were placed in a children's home after foster care is that they also speak about **reasons for separation from the foster family** and placement in a home. They list reasons which were easy for them to accept (placement in a home to facilitate access to high school education), as well as reasons that made life in foster care unacceptable for them (for example, unacceptable behavior of foster parents) or unacceptable for foster parents (unacceptable behavior of the child/adolescent), that is, reasons that were harder for them to accept.

An analysis of this theme on a general level has confirmed the belief that a conversation with the foster child about the reasons for separation from the family is in their best interest. It has been shown that such a conversation can be useful and timely at various life stages of people with the experience of a foster child.

→ 2 Understanding of foster care as a form of care

Elaborating on their own understanding of foster care as a form of care, research participants usually perceive foster care in two dominant ways, i.e. through two dominant perspectives: **conceptual** and **motivational**.

In relation to the **conceptual perspective**, research participants, regardless of their specific experience, status and age, experience foster care and the foster family as a **replacement (surrogate) family** for children without adequate parental care (*that don't have a family, that have a bad family situation*). They emphasize values such as care, concern, love, affection, sustenance, etc.

The other dominant perspective present in the interviews was related to the foster parents' **motivations** for fostering. Participants talk about **altruistic motivations** (desire to help, love for children) as well as **money and material gain** from fostering. Money as a motivation for fostering is considered by the participants to be highly undesirable and, in this context, some participants stated that they would personally rather adopt than foster a child, as they find the concept of receiving money for helping and caring for children to be unacceptable. Such statements and participants' experiences indicate how much foster children require a feeling of unconditional love and belonging that cannot be fully realized through foster care. The fact that foster parents receive an allowance for caring for children, probably weakens the sense of security of their status in the family in the experience of the children. In addition to the motivation of financial gain, some participants also mention exploitation of foster children for labor in the foster parents' household.

It is interesting to note that research participants talk about foster care **primarily from the position of their own experience, but also from the position of the experience of others**, i.e. other children. Participants state that they found out about the experiences of others through personal contacts with children in situations similar to their own.

Stories about the experiences of others are frequently negative, but important primarily because certain participants point out that the only information they received about their placement (e.g., information that they would be moved from a home to a foster family) and potential foster parents were obtained from other children. This information can be valuable by further underlining the importance of systematically investing in timely and adequate informing of children and communication with children about their experiences, perceptions, fears and dilemmas associated with their placement.

In relation to understanding the concept of foster care, participants who were placed in a **kinship foster family**, especially if they were placed at a younger age, as well as the birth children of kinship foster parents, often do not perceive the placement as foster care, but rather as **life in their own (extended) family**.

The experience of foster care as adoption occurs in the group of adults with foster care experience, that is, some participants from this group stress the importance and necessity of belonging to “one family,” as well as continued life in the family.

The perception of foster care, in accordance with the experiences and descriptions of the participants, is **multilayered and rich with a variety of details and specific understanding**, depending on age and life experience. For example, adults who were fostered as children are very thorough and reflective in their thoughts on foster care, which is logical considering their age and the time distance that enables them to reflect on their lives more clearly. Children and adolescents placed in a home after their placement in foster care was deemed inadequate have the most complex experience of foster care and talk about foster care in a variety of, often mutually exclusive, ways. Foster adolescents also do not have a one-dimensional perception of foster care, but analyze their concept of this form of care in relation to the characteristics of each individual child and foster family.

It is possible to conclude that understanding of foster care is more complex and multifaceted in the case of older participants and participants with more varied experiences in out-of-home care.

In addition to the multifaceted understanding of foster care, it should be noted that, although a **positive view of foster care is prevalent** in research participants, an unconditionally positive experience of foster care is only found in birth children.

When comparing placement in a children’s home and placement in a foster family, most participants **give preference to foster care** as a form of placement that provides a new quality of life, normalization and belonging. From the perspective of research participants, homes are described through a **lack** of privacy and freedom and an **excess** of children.

Individual participants also point out the advantages of living in a home, such as the opportunity for socializing with peers, as well as advantages of placement in a home for adolescents (more opportunities for extracurricular activities, homes are located in larger cities, etc.). In terms of the comparison of foster care and care in a home, children and adolescents placed in a home after their placement in foster care was deemed inadequate again have the most complex perception and comparison of these two types of accommodation. In general, research participants acknowledge the advantages and disadvantages of both foster care and care in a children's home, but associate more advantages with foster care, especially in the placement of younger children.

→ 3 Experience of foster child status

Status itself includes diverse areas of life and presents a complex and extensive subject. An approach that focuses on the research of one's personal experience of their own status makes the subject even more complex. Accordingly, in the descriptions of the experience of foster child status in the five observed groups of research participants, we identified fewer shared and more group-specific characteristics.

The shared characteristics of foster child status in all of the observed groups of participants are: **satisfaction of the participant with foster child status, parallel experience of being accepted and being different** and **the experience that living in a foster family is conditioned**.

Satisfaction with status, although prevalent in most groups, is not present in all of the aspects of status significant to the participants. In the experience of the research participants, satisfaction is most directly related to the *experience of acceptance* by members of the foster family and peers, that is, the *experience of inclusion* in the foster family through everyday activities, as well as the immediate social environment (school, peers, social network of the foster family, local community).

Another shared characteristic in the experience of most research participants from different groups is the existence of a kind of parallel experience of acceptance, both in the family and in the community of peers, with a simultaneous feeling of being different from other family members or peers who live with their own family. This parallel feeling of being different is associated with the experience of being isolated from peers at an earlier age (*...no one at all wanted to play with me in kindergarten.*), understanding of their status in specific life situations (*...they won't believe you, they'll say you're lying, that you're this and that...; ...every time anyone did anything, it would be mine or the little girl's fault...*), and their own perception of the world and its interpretation during adolescence (*Other children's parents come to the parent-teacher conference...; ...I don't think they need to know... now I'm gonna explain my life to them?!).*

It is significant that both experiences, acceptance and difference, carry a powerful, yet different emotional charge. In the participants' experience, acceptance is associated with feelings of love, togetherness and honor, while difference is associated with difficult emotions such as shame, fear and sadness.

Another shared characteristic in the experience of foster child status is the experience that belonging to and staying in the foster family is somehow conditioned by something the children must demonstrate, achieve, do or simply be. They appear to draw conclusions about who and how they need to be based on direct demands, usually from foster parents, but just as frequently based on their own reflections and interpretations of foster parent's behaviors and expectations. *Being a good student, behaving acceptably and being actively included in everyday household chores* occur in the participants' experience as the most necessary and sufficient conditions for staying in the foster family. It appears that the fulfillment of these conditions has multiple functions – from expressing gratitude to foster parents, demonstrating their competences, skills and interests, using their skills and achievements to expand their social network, engaging in a new peer group or class, showing that they are included in relationships with family members and that the relationship is important to them, to providing for their own future. Although less common, but not negligible, is the idea, and sometimes personal experience, of the participant that the foster child should be “young and cute” to be more readily accepted and included in the foster family.

Their experience of foster child status was more extensively and elaborately explained by participants with more life experience and more diverse experience of out-of-home care. This fact resulted in more specific experiences of status being found in groups of adolescent and adult participants, as well as in the group of children and adolescents placed in a home after their placement in foster care was deemed inadequate.

It should be noted that children placed in kinship foster care and birth children of foster parents have a specific position in relation to this theme. Namely, research participants placed in kinship families did not perceive and describe themselves as a foster child. Their descriptions of their own status were observed to approach the most the desired image of the experience of the status of a foster child as a family member. On the other hand, birth children are specific due to the fact that they described, on one hand, the experience of someone else's status, and on the other hand, their relationship to the person with that status. In this sense, birth children generally describe their experience of the foster child as a close and accepted family member, a brother or sister. On the other hand, birth children talk through the language of examples about the different status of foster children in relation to their own status in the family and among peers. This powerful message, “coming from the other side” in a way, further confirms the authenticity of the simultaneous experience of acceptance and inclusion with that of difference of foster children in foster families and the environment.

Additional specifics in the experience of difference of the foster child are described in the adolescent subsample. In accordance with the characteristics of their age group, adolescents particularly emphasized this sense of difference from their peers in terms of stricter *rules of behavior imposed by their foster parents*, as compared with the parents of their peers. Although they show understanding for these stricter rules, they also feel like this “marks” them as different in their peer group.

The most specific distinctions in the descriptions of foster child status are present in the group of children and adolescents placed in a home after their placement in foster care was deemed inadequate. These distinctions can be described as additions to the aforementioned shared characteristics of foster child status. This primarily refers to an expansion on the experience of being different. For example, a strongly emotional, mostly *negative experience of difference from members of the foster family, dissatisfaction with ways of meeting psychosocial and existential needs* in a foster family and awareness of *difference stemming from the formal administrative framework* that regulates their status.

As stated previously, at the level of professional policy, the status of the child is usually discussed through six aspects: availability of food and feeding habits, safety and care, protection, health, psychosocial needs and education. Participants in this research spoke about all of these aspects through their descriptions of their experience of foster child status, thereby confirming that the professional and user perspective can “walk hand-in-hand.”

The common message in these descriptions is that experience foster child status is not one-dimensional, but rather very complex and often internally contradictory. The participants sent a message that there can be no black-and-white experience and that general satisfaction with one’s status and form of care can exist even when there are aspects and experiences that are not optimal and the most desirable (*...it wasn’t that bad, but there were some bad aspects...*).

4 Characteristics of experience

With regard to characteristics of experience of life in foster care, research participants exhibit the whole **continuum of experiences and emotions**: from extremely positive to extremely negative, which individuals report they would rather forget. Participants talk openly about both positive and negative experiences. In the case of all participants (currently in foster care), it is possible to observe **satisfaction and positive experiences of living in the current foster family**, even though some participants had previous negative experiences in foster care.

Most of the participants describe their experience through the **structure of everyday life** in the foster family and through **their own status in the family**. Participants emphasize the **feeling of inclusion** in family activities and the **feeling of belonging** to the foster family, which generally depends on time spent in a specific family (the longer the stay, the greater the feeling of inclusion). Some adult participants maintain regular contact with their foster family even after becoming independent, that is, they view the foster family as their own.

An analysis of interviews with research participants provides a clear idea, in this area as well as others, about how important the feeling of inclusion and belonging to the foster family is. Inclusion of children in everyday family life and participation in decision making result in stronger sense of belonging and positive effect on the child's sense of security, and thereby successful adjustment to foster care.

In terms of the process of **adjustment to the foster family**, or the placement of the child in a specific family, regardless of whether we assume the perspective of foster or birth children, it is evident that this is a **normal adjustment process**. Participants state that "everything was strange" initially, but later, with time, feelings and experiences normalize. However, in almost all groups of participants, i.e. those who have been placed in foster care, we encounter statements which speak on the **insufficient preparation** for separation from the birth family and placement in foster care. Certain participant groups also emphasize the importance of gradual inclusion of children in the foster family. In this regard, a clear message is sent by participants in this research about the need for investing more in procedures and ways of preparing children for the separation and placement outside of the birth family: from the information level and children's rights level to the level of preparation aimed at emotional aspects of the separation. Birth children of foster parent often stress their **sense of importance** because their family is engaged in foster care and mention their involvement in the decision. It is important to nurture this sense of importance and involvement in foster children as well, by way of providing them information and enabling the child to actively participate in the decision about placement.

Talking about their own experiences, participants mention an entire **spectrum of emotions** associated with foster care – from the negative to the positive. In the case of children who have experience with changing placement, negative emotions like fear, insecurity and abandonment occur more frequently. Negative emotions also occur in the group of birth children of foster parents, largely with regard to foster children leaving the family.

In the context of experience, we also find descriptions of relationships with professionals, where it can be noted that **adult participants more frequently describe positive experiences with professionals** than do children.

→ 5 Participation in decision making

The theme of participation in decision making relates to the research participants' experiences regarding **participation in making important life decisions**, such as separation from the birth family and placement in foster care, as well as **participation in making decisions related to everyday activities** of the child and family.

An analysis of data significant for this theme within individual participants group shows great uniformity in relation to the description of participation in making important life decisions. The only exception in this respect is the group of birth children of foster parents who are the only ones, in accordance with their age and maturity, with experience in participating in important life decisions, that is, the decision of their family to foster a child and become a foster family. Key elements of this participation are, in the words of the children, information from parents, family conversation on this important subject (*... we sat down at the table and openly talked about why, how, what that was supposed to be like and mean...*), and the fact that parents asked children for their opinion and acknowledged their opinion. Although birth children mostly emphasize that the decision was made by the parents, they consider this experience of participation in decision making positive and significant and point out that foster children should be more frequently asked for their opinion and allowed to participate in decisions concerning their lives.

All other groups of research participants, that is, participants with the experience of foster children, do not have the experience of participating in important decisions in this manner. Quite the opposite, they have a wealth of experience of nonparticipation, which they describe through inability to obtain information about what will happen to them, getting false information, waiting too long for key information and decisions, being treated as objects (*...they put me here... took charge of me, loaded me into the car.*), persuasion by professionals to accept already made decisions and other ways. However, it appears as if, with increasing age and experience related to social welfare institutions, participants from different groups (adults, adolescents placed in a children's home) became more proactive and willing to represent themselves and their needs, assert themselves with the professionals and demand the right to participate in decisions, propose new solutions that better suited them, and seek the possibility to challenge decisions that they disagreed with for any reason. This behavior was generally accepted and also resulted in satisfaction. Such examples demonstrate that the participation of children in the making of important life decisions is acceptable and feasible for professionals, even when it is not initiated by them.

On the other hand, participants from all groups describe age-appropriate experience of participating in decision making regarding everyday life, and provide examples that substantiate this fact. The participation largely occurred in the foster family with regard to choices (food, clothes, friends, school) and plans (contact with parents, trips, summer vacations, continued education and even continued accommodation).

At the experiential level, the opportunity to participate in decision making was generally associated by the participants with a sense of satisfaction and self-worth.

Messages received from the children's perspectives regarding this theme raise important questions of setting standards for informing children about decisions and actions which are taken and applied in solving their life situations. They also raise questions about the legitimacy of certain ways of representing and informing children and their best interests, as well as their involvement in the decision-making process concerning important life issues for the child.

→ 6 The birth family from the children's perspective

In the description of their birth family, the dominant impression is that of **different, yet similar** stories of research participants. The **basic similarities** in their stories are the severity of family problems, unpleasant memories of life in the family and a number of difficult emotions associated with the family, even after a longer period of time. Some participants find it difficult to talk about their birth family and the interviews reflect a strong emotional charge and burden that the individuals shoulder. There is a **paradox of emotions** where anger and resentment toward their parents are present alongside a longing for life in the birth family and acceptance by parents. Although they share certain elements, each life story and each description of the birth family is very specific and personal, which must be taken into consideration when working with these group of children and adults.

Participants often describe their **families** and birth parents **through a wide range of problems and inappropriate behavior**: physical and mental illness, addiction, unemployment, neglect and child abuse, domestic violence, etc. Birth children of foster parents do not have much information about the families of foster children and talk about this subject mainly through the sense of empathy with foster children and a negative attitude toward their parents.

The descriptions of the birth family are often dominated by **vague and incomplete memories**, especially for those participants who were separated in early childhood. Some of the adult participants talk about their attempts to find their birth parents. In certain interviews, it can also be noted that some participants never had the opportunity to work through their difficult life experiences and traumas and the interview allowed them to talk to someone about their experiences (sometimes for the first time). In this sense, a strong message is sent to child care professionals that it is necessary to consider each individual child and each difficult life story and allow children to talk about and work through negative and difficult experiences. Although professionals are confronted with many difficult life stories on a daily basis and, in this sense, the story of an individual family becomes "only one of many," for the family and especially for the children, this is the only story and experience they have and it is, therefore, important to emphasize it appropriately.

All of the adults involved in the process of separation from the family and placement should focus on finding ways to protect children's memories, adequately work through experiences and traumas and ensure a connection and contact with the birth family.

The importance of contact and connection with members of the birth family can be observed in all groups of participants with the experience of foster care. In this sense, birth children also recognize the importance of contact with the birth family for foster children. Children and adults who were, or still are, in foster care emphasize the **importance of placing siblings together** and experience relationships with their brothers and sisters as a strength. Most participants maintain regular contact with at least some members of their immediate or extended family. Most frequently, these are brothers and sisters, and less frequently parents.

In summation, we can conclude that the birth family is an important theme for all participants, though often difficult and associated with vague and incomplete memories and information. Contact and connection with members of the birth family is also extremely important.

Therefore, at the level of planning out-of-home interventions, it is truly necessary to build certain rituals that will maintain the connection with the birth family, such as cultivation of memory, sharing of experiences, traditions, and maintaining regular contact with family members. This process contributes to the children's sense of belonging and safety.

➔ 7 The foster family from the perspective of children/participants with experience of foster care

The theme of the foster family from the child's perspective is one of the most exhaustively and positively described themes because a positive attitude towards their foster family was recognized in all groups of participants, and in some (foster children, birth children, adults) it is the dominant way of experiencing foster care. Accordingly, with the purpose of summarizing the key common features of experience of the foster family from the perspective of children/participants with the experience of foster care, attention will primarily be focused specifically on the **positive experiences of the foster family** and the **experience of benefits for the child from placement in a foster family**.

Analysis shows that exhaustiveness in describing positive experiences of the foster family is associated with the age of the participant. Most comprehensive descriptions are found in the group of adult participants who were able to, over time, fully integrate their experience with the foster family.

The positive experience of the foster family has many different forms and expressions and, for example, includes the following descriptions:

- foster family as the birth family (*family for life*)
- foster parent as the real parent
- provides a sense of security, acceptance and belonging to the family unit
- provides ongoing support and a sense of security in the future
- provides a sense of satisfaction from being exactly in the specific family
- a foster family much better than the birth family.

The experience of personal benefits from placement in a foster family is also extensively described. Younger participants are more likely to identify and specify the benefits as realization of basic human needs (*food, regular meals, cleanliness, order, work habits, learning, better grades...*), while adolescents and adults are additionally directed to a higher level of benefits in the areas of the development of values, personality traits, personal responsibility, quality of interpersonal relationships, social networks and lifestyle. This implies that the influence of the foster family on children is very powerful and it appears that there truly is no area of life that does not demonstrate benefits and positive changes. From the perspective of children/participants, the foster family is the most desirable form of care, children without adequate parental care, because of such a wealth of positive effects and benefits for the child.

Participants from the group of birth children of foster parents share with other groups of research participants the positive experience of the foster family, but the **positive perspective is significantly expanded**. Regarding this, we should especially note the positive experience of their own family because it is a foster family, attributing positive motivations for fostering to parents and the family, recognizing positive changes that have occurred in the family through foster care and identifying specific benefits to themselves as family members.

Although the foster family is predominantly positively described from the perspective of research participants, one segment of participants expressed **different perspectives based on their own, partially or entirely, negative experience**. The experience of the foster family is associated with some undesirable characteristics (violent behavior of foster parents) that the participants found threatening and humiliating and/or reminded them of their own birth family, which they were separated from partly because of the same characteristics. These experiences and descriptions are a powerful reminder of the importance of selection, as well as supervision and control of foster families in the process of care for children and young people.

This theme is also linked to a whole series of descriptions where the participants with the experience of placement in multiple foster families compared the different families in some way. When the experience of the foster families is positive, participants find it difficult to compare families and report that they are different, but that each one provided them with some benefits.

➔ 8 Recommendations

All of the recommendations and messages presented by research participants are summarized in a Table 10. Even at first glance, it is clear that the **greatest number of recommendations is aimed at professionals in social welfare**, but also wider, as some of the recommendations are related to changes in the concept of foster care, as well as changes in legislature.

Table 10 Overview of recommendations of participants in relation to professionals, foster parents and foster children

WHO?	FOR WHOM? Professionals	Foster parents	Other (foster) children
Foster children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher level of control and more frequent supervision of foster parents • Ask children about their opinions and feelings • Respect the children's recommendations • Prepare children for separation (meet the foster family prior to placement, inform which family they will be placed in) • Use appropriate and non-insulting language with children • Assume responsibility for children that are being placed • A need for continuity of relationships with professionals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desirable traits of foster parents: reasonable, caring, respect children's opinions, do not beat children, provide support 	
Foster adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher level of control of the foster family • Ask for children's opinions on separation • Explain the process of separation to children • Ensure the child's stay in one foster family (no changes of placement) • Communicate with children more frequently during the initial adjustment to the foster family, but also later • Organize meetings, trips, etc. for children, centers and foster parents • Assistance at the time of leaving the foster family • More stringent intervention towards parents • Help and education of parents about child care • Accelerating the process of separation and parent supervision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desirable traits of foster parents: kind to children, willing to help, loving, caring, honest, responsible, stable, patient and understanding with foster children, treat their own and foster children equally, provide assistance in the child's adjustment to the family • Motivation for fostering should be help and support and not financial gain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children need the advice of adults with regard to separation because they are inexperienced • Children should have no prejudices against foster care as it is for their own good

WHO?	FOR WHOM? Professionals	Foster parents	Other (foster) children
Children and adolescents placed in a children's home following inadequate foster care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement of children in the process of informing and deciding about placement (it is important to talk with children, hear and listen to their opinions and wishes, explain and prepare them, help them understand that this is an important decision for them) • Specific conditions that must be met in relation to the traits of the foster child in terms of preference for younger age, placing siblings together and the child's consent to this form of placement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferred positive foster parent behavior and care for children • Motivation of foster parents: money should not be the primary motivation, but rather love of children 	
Adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Method of communication with children based on respect for children, relationships, care, contacts, and the rights of children, or work in the best interest of the child • The need for legislative changes and changes in the concept of foster care • Creation of alternative forms of foster care 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain firm and strong and continue education
Birth children of foster parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More contact and communication with foster and birth children • Gradual inclusion of children into the family • Better informing of children and better preparation, respect and awareness of the need for time to adjust • Professionals should use their expertise, assume the perspective of children and help them in that way • Acquaint the foster family with the traits of the child coming to the family • Acknowledge the opinions of children (foster and birth) • Verify foster families • Professionals should invest more effort because children have the impression that only want to get the job done • Talk to foster families, provide support and assistance whereby children see professionals and other foster parents as a source of support • Foster children of the approximate age of birth children – generational proximity as a recommendations • Pay attention to the need for continued contact with foster children after they leave the foster family • Recommendation for birth parents: more care and contact with their children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desirable traits of foster parents: clean and kind people with good communication skills 	

Professionals are reproached for the absence or irregularity of contact with children in foster care, resulting in the absence of a necessary relationship with the children. Thereby, they are an unknown for the children, instead of being a person of confidence. Participants particularly emphasize the need for **better and more detailed preparation of children and gradual inclusion and adjustment into a foster family**. They also emphasize that children should be **more included in decisions about out-of-home placement** and suggest that professionals **adapt their method of communication to be more understanding and respectful of the children**. Bearing in mind all of the recommendations for the professionals, in general, it can be concluded that inadequate behaviors of professionals (withholding information, irregularity or absence of contact, lack of preparation for the separation of the child) perceived by research participants are interpreted by children to mean that the professionals do not care sufficiently about their best interests, which can further violate the sense of security in children.

Furthermore, they recommend that the professionals take a series of actions **aimed at assistance, but also greater supervision of foster families, as well as a need for more strict and timely interventions towards birth parents**.

In general, it seems that the most important message of the research participants is associated with the need for **greater inclusion and acknowledgment of children** during separation from their families and change of placement. In this regard, participants often point out the **absence of relationship between the child and professionals**, while in some cases the children clearly do not know their social worker and have very infrequent contact with them, which is particularly dangerous in cases of violation of the child's rights in the foster family because child does not know whom to contact in such a case.

In addition to recommendations aimed at professionals, there are also **recommendations aimed at foster parents with regard to defining desirable characteristics and behaviors of foster parents** toward children. In this respect, participants point out characteristics such as care, willingness to help, respect for children, love for children, etc. In addition to the desirable characteristics of foster parents, the recommendations are also directed to the question of motivation of foster parents for engaging in foster care, with the reiterated view that **financial gain as a motivation is not acceptable** to participants in this research. In contrast to financial gain as a motivation, they emphasize values such as love, help and support.

The least number of recommendations from research participants are **aimed at foster children**, that is to say, messages for this group are given by older participants (adolescents and adults). They send foster children positive messages (to remain steadfast and strong, to educate themselves) and recommendations based on personal experience (listen to adults because of their greater experience, be open to foster care).

➔ 9 Specific themes

In addition to the analysis of eight themes defined in the previous chapter, attention was also focused on other themes that were identified during the course of the interviews with participants from certain groups. Generally, three to four themes are discussed under the heading “specific themes” for each group of participants. Analysis and summarizing of these themes resulted in the following four specific themes: **positive orientation, uncertainty, a comparison of the foster family and a children’s home** and **social welfare professionals**. The above themes will be expanded on in this section.

Positive orientation of the participants was observed in different forms and expressions in all participant groups. Given the difficult life experiences of the participants, the pronounced positive orientation could be surprising, however, given the method of formation of subsamples through the principle of voluntary participation, it was to be expected that participation in the research would be more frequently accepted by participants who are successful and more satisfied with themselves. A positive experience of themselves and a positive life orientation was recognized in the youngest participants through **highlighting achievements in activities and academics**, in adolescents through further descriptions of **their own positive traits**, while the adult participants emphasized **independence, personal responsibility, work and family successes**. Plans for the future are also part of this theme, primarily because these plans, particularly in adolescents, show a positive direction through providing for themselves and helping members of the birth and foster family. Plans for the future of some participants are occasionally associated with thoughts and desires regarding their own involvement in foster care by assuming the role of foster parents. Elements of positive orientation, as defined above, are especially present in adults, adolescents and foster children groups.

Participants from several groups send a message that placement in a foster family can be perceived as a state of uncertainty. Foster children, i.e. the youngest participants, associate uncertainty with the **temporary character of placement in a foster family**, while birth children of foster parents associate it with **sadness, confusion and disappointment** that occurs with placements of foster children in their families that are short-term or of uncertain duration. Children speak about the difficulties and losses in these types of uncertain situations directly and through their own experiences, but also through examples and experiences of other foster children. Stories of other foster children are always more difficult and negative than their own and serve in different functions in various situations, but always address the consequences of insecurity and uncertainty. It seems that uncertainty reaches a peak in the case of participants with experience of multiple changes of placement. These experiences are described as very painful and traumatizing. Children feel alone and, even when they focus on important people in their environment, they do not receive help and support. These are situations where decisions and key “moves” are made by people unknown (unimportant) to them, making their world seem very uncertain in these moments, and their immediate future more uncertain still.

The theme of comparison of the foster family and the children's home was especially relevant to the group of participants placed in a children's home following inadequate foster care and the adults group. The former group describes their understanding of placement in a children's home in such a way that demonstrates that, at a younger age, the understanding is related to **their physical and emotional safety**, while adolescents associate it with the **possibility of building their own identity**. **The presence and influence of other children** appear as key elements of care in a children's home in terms of safety and security. In the children's assessment, a children's home offers the added advantages of financial **security and other opportunities** for children, that is the possibilities it offers (*... you're a child from a children's home and wherever you go, you don't have to pay for anything, you go on all the trips, you go to the seaside, you go skiing...*). In terms of comparing the foster family and the children's home, there are **differing opinions and arguments**. Participants with no experience with placement in a children's home give preference to the foster family, due to meeting the child's needs better and allowing more privacy. Participants with experience in both types of placement are somewhat divided. If the experience in the foster family is negative, preference is given to placement in a children's home, based on personal experience and benefits in terms of a better life, more privacy, greater respect for their rights and more emotional and physical safety and support.

The experiences of participants with professionals in social welfare centers are especially well-elaborated in the adolescents and adults participant groups. While adolescents talk about **lack of contact with these professionals and absence of any relationship**, some of the adult participants describe the great **significance, quality and continuity** of their relationships with these professionals, usually social workers. Not only the participants from these two groups, but also participants from all groups provide two diametrically opposite images of experience with social welfare professionals. The undesirable variation is described through insufficient contact, absence of relationship, greater focus of professionals on spatial and material conditions of foster care than on foster children. The positive experiences of participants with professionals in social welfare centers indicate a need for a good, lasting and ongoing relationship with the same professional (social worker), but also for alignment of the professionals' actions with specific needs and circumstances of the beneficiary (child, adolescent) and the beneficiary's ability to recognize the sincere efforts of professionals for their own benefit, as well as their commitment on both a professional and personal level.

Taking into account the perspectives of participants expressed through specific themes, as well as other themes, the importance of steering the system towards a variety of solutions becomes clear, not only at the level of the child care system, but primarily within the same type of accommodation (out-of-home) or intervention.

5

Conclusions and Recommendations

“Children are interested and good participants in the research and intervention sense and therefore they should be more often included in all decision important for their lives.”

Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted with five selected groups of participants, who voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, with the purpose of gaining insight into and describing the understanding of foster care from the perspective of children. A transcript of the recorded interviews, authorized by the participants, resulted in 645 pages of text (Times New Roman font, font size 12 pt, single-spaced) presenting the perspective of the participants in the broadest sense. An analysis of the text according to the principles of qualitative methodology has resulted, firstly, in the description of the specific perspective of each of the five groups of participants, and secondly, in the description of the experience of foster care through eight specific themes.

Based on this analysis, several conclusions and recommendations for improving foster care of children in Croatia can be proposed from the perspective of children, or the user perspective. In doing so, user recommendations are directly conveyed or more transparently phrased whenever they are available, and when user recommendations are not available, they are formulated based on the messages and descriptions of experiences of the participants.

1

Firstly, it should be noted that this research **confirms that children are competent partners in conversation when it comes to their life experience**. The conclusion is based on the fact that the children, after being adequately informed about the objectives and purpose of the research, voluntarily participated in the research. As participants, the children competently, in accordance to their age and experience, described their experience of foster care and voluntarily participated in authorizing the written version of their interviews. Furthermore, the conclusion is based on the fact that some of them are interested in continued participation in the joint analysis of gathered results and guidelines, which are an integral part of this text.

Recommendations:

- Present the results, conclusions and recommendations of the research to participants for discussion, expansion and finalizing. The secondary outcome of the realization of this recommendation could be a formulation and description of a model for participatory work with beneficiaries of social welfare services.
- Children with the appropriate experience and suitable age should be invited and engaged as consultants in the process of preparation of documents and strategies related to out-of-home child care, so that they can offer their personal opinion from their perspective and represent the interests of beneficiaries.
- Encourage the establishment of associations, forums and similar beneficiary organizations in terms of establishing a legitimate and continuous presence of the beneficiary (children's) perspective in the public child care system.

2

We have identified, described and documented, through powerful statements of participants, **the importance of informing children about all the key features of forms of care available to them, as well as the importance of involving children as participants in the planning and decision making in all stages of care.** Children are not only good participants in research; they are primarily **interested and good participants** in the intervention sense. Research participants speak about foster care, as well as the entire system of care, in different ways according to their age and experience, but their statements still contain the emotional dimension that further indicates the importance of professionally based communication with children, i.e. the importance of conversation in the participatory sense (deciding about placement and the course of the intervention) and the intervention sense (nurturing children's memories, working on experiences, especially traumatic ones, venting emotions). The need for keeping children well-informed and the participation of children in decision making about their care are unanimous messages of all groups of research participants. Thereby, the meaning given by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the literature and many other professional documents and standards (for example, *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*, see p. 11) is focused on creating the conditions for expressing the views of the child in all matters concerning their life and confirmed by the children themselves, that is, from the user perspective.

Recommendations:

- Assemble brief informational materials (flyer, CD, website, etc.) with comprehensive information on foster care, but also other types of out-of-home care, written using language understandable to children.
- Develop guidelines and standards for communication between professionals and children being prepared for separation from their birth families. The standards should include the age and gender perspective, and set the guidelines for conduct of professionals related to information about placement, involvement in decision making about placement, supervision of placement, termination of placement and preparation of a transition plan.
- Develop a protocol and standards for conduct of professionals from different systems in the event of separation of the child from the family and placement outside of the family, including time frame.
- From a user perspective, it seems particularly important to set guidelines and standards for self-empowerment of adolescents in out-of-family care.

3

Children send the message that they are **satisfied with the form of care or placement that they are currently** (at the time of research) in. This information is extremely important, together with the knowledge that the research sample most likely includes participants who were the most satisfied, both with themselves and the type and quality of care and placement. With regard to foster care from the children's perspective, the image is predominantly but not exclusively positive. In the experiences of children and adult participants, the **foster family is a substitute family for children without adequate parental care**. Meanwhile, from the beneficiaries' experience, placement in a foster family is a form of care preferable to placement in a children's home, although exactly the opposite can be stated for the experience of a certain number of research participants. Their evaluation of specific forms of care and the overall system of public welfare is based on the participants' personal experience, the experience of their siblings and parents, but also the experience of other children in need of placement outside their family. On one hand, these experiences are a source of examples, and on the other hand a reflection of their needs, which speak in favor of a public welfare system for children based on a wide range of interventions with the possibility of multiple, parallel interventions.

Recommendations:

- Expand the concept of deinstitutionalization to include new forms of out-of-home care and accommodation, and not reduce it to two options: a children's home or foster family, by allowing for different types of foster families, children's homes and new alternative forms of care (for example, supported independent housing) that increase the possibility of individualized care tailored to the specific needs of individuals.
- Based on the understanding of their needs and the needs of their birth family, but above all the importance that the birth family still has for them, research participants indirectly propose that the intervention system must be based on a systematic approach resting on the idea that specific interventions be carried out simultaneously and in parallel with the whole family, not only to prevent separation, but in also in general. If the foster family is a surrogate family, then the "real" family must be retrained for its original function as soon as possible. In practical terms, this would mean that the separation of a child from the family automatically entails, not only planning their placement, but also the planning of interventions for parents and the rest of the family in order to eliminate the circumstances that led to the separation and allow for the return of the child to the family. A part of these interventions is also preparing, maintaining and monitoring the frequency and quality of contact with foster children. All of the above must always include the beneficiaries.

4

Important standards of the profession related to the quality of foster care, and out-of-home care in general, were also confirmed from the research participants' perspective, which is both the user and largely children's perspective. Specifically, many experiences described by research participants confirm the existence of elements of quality in foster care in practice, both past and present. Meanwhile, research participants also spoke, through their experiences, about aspects of foster care that can be changed, modernized and made more adequate and acceptable to beneficiaries. As seen from the user perspective, the quality of foster care is recognized, for example, in **ensuring a healthy family experience for the child, ensuring the conditions for positive growth and development, satisfaction of the child with the foster family, especially the relationship with the foster parents.** These are also aspects of foster care which can be improved, in the opinion of the participants. We will mention only some of the aspects in which the quality of foster care needs to be improved in the opinion of the participants. For example: balancing non altruistic and altruistic motivations for foster care, preparedness of children for separation from their family and placement in the foster family, placement of siblings in the same family, fostering the sense of continuity and planned (secure) future, strengthening contacts with the birth family, better preparedness of professionals for keeping in contact and working with foster children, etc.

➔ Recommendations:

- From the perspective of children, preparation for inclusion in a foster family requires the active participation of the child, birth family, professionals and foster parents over a certain period of time.
- Reinforce the implementation of guidelines for alternative child care with regard to informing and including children in all stages of care, through additional education of professionals.
- Expand on existing models of selection, preparation, education, monitoring and supervision of foster parents to include aspects related to the children's perspective. For example, educate foster parents about the importance of their motivation for foster care to foster children and how to discuss their motivation with foster children. In addition, educate foster parents about the importance of respectful communication with and about the foster children's birth parents.
- Whenever possible, due to family circumstances and characteristics of the children, jointly include siblings in decision making about separation and new placement.
- Whenever it is in the child's best interest (due to changes that occur during placement), combine two or more forms of care or measures (for example, weekend foster care and a children's home).
- Humanize and individualize the process of termination of care with the purpose of increasing the sense of security in children and young people.

5

We deliberately and intentionally end this conclusion and recommendations in keeping with the method of participatory research, with direct recommendations from children and adults. As previously mentioned, research participants have **distilled their specific experiences into a number of very specific recommendations** for professionals, foster parents and foster children. Most of these recommendations are part of the *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*, already known to the professionals or are in some way already mentioned in this text but, hopefully, gain new power through the children's (user) perspective.

The recommendations are related to:

- **the importance of the relationship** between children and professionals (primarily professionals from social welfare centers and children's homes, but also foster parents)
- the need for overcoming feelings of **uncertainty and insecurity** that arise due to lack of involvement and communication with children during placement
- consideration of family circumstances and possible interventions, primarily **from the perspective of the child and in the child's best interest**, and not the parents', as well as more stringent and timely interventions on birth parents
- the need for **normalization of out-of-home care**. Children point out that that life in out-of-home placement (foster family or children's home) can be evaluated as good, despite some bad aspects, and that it is unnecessary to categorize people, circumstances and interventions too severely. An approximation of a normal, natural family life is preferable.
- the need for greater **inclusion and cohesion** (in deciding on interventions, life in the foster family, relationship with the birth family, foster parents, professionals)
- the need for reinforcing the **children's confidence in foster care** (children advise other children that foster care is for their own good)
- the need for starting a **discussion about the relationship between foster care and adoption** (for example, in cases of long-term and kinship foster care)
- the demand that, in addition to following formal procedures, a professional must be able to demonstrate **essential human interest in the child** and their life.

6

Participation of Children – from Active Participation to Partnership with Researchers

“Research participants gave their consent that the research findings, as well as conclusions and recommendations formulated on the basis of these findings, can be presented to the public.”

In the description of research methodology (Chapter 3), it was emphasized that children can be involved in research in at least two ways – as **active participants** and as **researchers** (Clark 2004). As the involvement of participants is one of the fundamental ideas and values of this research, efforts were made during the research to raise the level of involvement of children from active participation to partnership with the researchers. We sought to achieve this through active application of well-known principles of child participation in all stages of research. It is well known that participation is possible (and desirable) from the research planning stage to the stage of formulation and dissemination of conclusions based on the findings. In studies in the field of child care in Croatia, we find examples of involvement of participants in the stage of conducting research in terms of consenting to participation and providing feedback on the collected data (for example, Koller-Trbović and Žižak 2005; Ajduković, Kregar Orešković, Sladović Franz 2008; Jeđud 2011), however, involvement of participants in other stages is still fairly rare, particularly in the research planning stage (Ajduković, Rajter and Sušac 2010). In this context, Ajduković, Kregar Orešković and Sladović Franz (2008) recommend the expansion of the user perspective in all stages of research and the right to authorization and introduction of new forms of expression (such as anonymous written statements on the research subject).

Table 11 Methods of child participation in the research

Stages of the research:	Methods of participation:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • planning the research • drafting the research 	no participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conducting the research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • obtaining information about the research and consenting for participation in research • giving consent for the interview • reviewing the interview • providing feedback and additional comments on the transcript of the interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • data processing • draft of findings, conclusions and guidelines 	no participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presentation of findings, conclusions and recommendations of the research to participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participation in workshops that presented the findings and conclusions • commenting on the findings and conclusions • giving consent for publication and further dissemination of the findings and conclusions • giving consent for the use of verbatim statements of participants (quotes) in the final version of the text
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presentation of findings, conclusions and recommendations to the broader professional public. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is planned for participants to actively participate in promoting the publication based on the findings and conclusions of the research.

In order to allow more space and possibility for participation and empower the position of the beneficiary, both in the context of foster care as an intervention and in the context of research with children, in this research we sought to find a method to get participants more involved and to enable them to participate beyond merely “providing data.”

Table 11 presents the stages of the research Children’s Perspective on Foster Care, with reference to child participation in various stages. The table shows that the active involvement of research participants is present in three out of five planned stages of this participatory research. Furthermore, it shows that the usual methods of child participation were applied during the stage of conducting the research (mostly described in earlier chapters) and also that some methods of participation have yet to be realized during the presentation of research findings to the general public. The new development and a significant step toward a higher level of child participation in research, in our opinion, were achieved during the stage of presenting the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the research to the participants. Therefore, the collaboration of participants and researchers in this stage of the research will be further described.

➔ Involvement of participants in the stage of presenting the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the research to research participants

During the conceptualization stage of the research and during the stage of conducting the research with research participants, it was agreed that the findings, conclusions and recommendations would be presented to and verified with the participants. To that effect, a meeting was organized for all of the research participants on October 1st of 2011 in Zagreb, at the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences. The purpose of the meeting was to familiarize the participants with the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the research and the manner in which the findings were presented in written form.

The meeting was preceded by individual contact with each participant by telephone and, in some cases, additionally by e-mail (see Appendix). The purpose of the meeting was explained to the participants and the majority of them showed interest in participating in the meeting in the first contact. There was no contact with four children who had been staying in a children’s home at the time of the research, but had changed accommodation since.

Of the total number of research participants (50), the meeting was attended by 19 individuals, as follows: three foster children, six foster adolescents, three children placed in a children’s home following inadequate foster care, two birth children of foster parents and five adults with experience in foster care as children. Therefore, the next level of participation was attended by more than one third of all of research participants (38%), with children and young people constituting the majority.

Many of the participants were not able to change previous family or business engagements (e.g., working Saturday, wedding, soccer match), and for some it was difficult to organize a visit to Zagreb due to financial or time constraints (e.g., participants from the Osijek-Baranja County). Some participants cancelled their attendance due to health issues (cold, flu). It should also be taken into account that most participants are children or young people who need to be accompanied by adults (foster parents, parents, educators) to come to Zagreb, which made organization even more difficult.

The meeting with research participants was organized as follows:

11:00 - 11:30	gathering of the participants with juice, coffee and other refreshments
11:30 - 12:00	greeting from UNICEF representatives and researchers, and agreement on the method of work
12:00 - 13:30	small group discussion about research results
13:30 - 15:00	socializing of all participants and companions over lunch
15:00 - 15:30	reports from work groups and final conclusions

The presentation of research findings was carried out in five parallel workshops with regard to participant group (foster children, foster adolescents, children/adolescents placed in a children's home after an experience in foster care, birth children of foster parents and adults with experience in foster care as children). Two methods were applied – one with children and young people and the other with adult research participants.

The summarized version of the results was presented to **children and young people**. A Power Point presentation was made for each of the groups, presenting the key findings and conclusions of each theme, with verbatim statements of participants (quotes) that illustrate individual statements. After the presentation of each theme, the participants were asked several questions:

- *Do the research findings correspond with their experience and with what they wanted to say in the interview?*
- *In their opinion, is the privacy of the child whose quotation is used sufficiently protected?*
- *Do they wish to add anything?*

An analysis of the records, kept on the work of each group by volunteers, demonstrated that participants in all group discussions felt the need to share some experiences again and thus confirm that the presented conclusions are in accordance with their experience and how they presented it through interviews. Two themes incited particularly compelling discussion and underlined the different perspectives of participants in relation to them. The themes were related to birth parents and their ability to change and the comparison of care giving potentials and benefits of the children's home and foster family.

After all of the findings were presented by theme, children and young people were asked some additional questions related to the participatory aspects of the research. The questions were as follows:

- *After hearing all the findings, what is your general impression?*
- *Is foster care from the children's perspective a subject that needs research?*
- *How did you feel during the research? How do you feel about the findings?*
- *Is there anything else regarding foster care that you think is important and we did not mention or research?*

Based on the experience of team leaders, as well as the records of group discussions on the course and results of the research, the answers to these questions can be presented as follows.

- All of the groups gave statements on positive impressions of the participants regarding the presented findings and the entire research. We heard statements like: *I think that the presentation covers everything... experiences are different; I'm enjoying all of it; I agree with most of what we've seen.*
- Children stated that foster care of children from the children's perspective is an important subject that merits further research because *maybe some children are not doing well in their foster family; children are suffering and that should be fixed; some things need to be known and it's great that someone is doing research so that others can see the faults and advantages of this; it might activate the consciousness and conscience of some people who read it; all children have to be asked how they feel in foster care – that's important, as is their consent.*
- In general, it is possible to conclude that the children felt good during the research and after hearing the findings. They reported that their safety during the interviews was important, as well as the fact that the researchers came to their foster family *to see how they were doing.* Now, at the end of the research, they feel good about the obtained results because *we can help other children in this way; their experience could have been different if someone had done something sooner; it's a good feeling to know that someone thinks of you and includes you in activities – if not for yourself, then for other children; she could be a part of it; feels more mature; she feels like she matters; they know someone cares about them; our opinion goes further... we're being heard.*
- Generally, it was confirmed that the research included all elements of foster care important to children and young people. Although the majority of participants agreed with this statement, phrased by one participant as *it's all written here,* this part of the conversation still contained occasional revisiting of the subject of working with birth parents and foster parents. This only confirms that speaking with children and young people, especially on such delicate issues, is not a matter of one encounter, but rather a continuous process.

The questions asked in the final part of the group conversation were intended to confirm the research participants' agreement with the findings and how they would be presented to the public, verify whether they feel that their privacy is protected adequately and appropriately and explore the possibility of further participation. In order to achieve this, the following questions were prepared:

- *Do you agree that the findings, the abridged version of which was presented to you, be published?*
- *Do you feel that your privacy will be protected, although the text literally quotes some of your statements and words?*
- *What do you think about continued meetings of researchers and participants (after the interviews, now, in the future – suggestions possible)?*

All of the participants expressed their consent for the findings, conclusions and recommendations to be presented to the public in the form prepared and presented to them by the research team. They feel that the publication of results is important, particularly because of the recommendations for professionals and foster parents. Unanimous consent was also obtained regarding respect of privacy. The participants confirmed that their privacy was protected even with citation of their literal statements. Continued cooperation and participation are considered important and possible. They verbalize it as follows: *it's nice to be a part of something; it's not boring; I don't have a problem talking about my life; it's good to be involved.*

Different methods were used in the **adults group**. Several weeks before the meeting, adults were sent all of the materials related to the presentation of findings and conclusions from their group. They were asked to read the text before the meeting. Discussion at the meeting started with their impressions after reading the text, their experience of the findings, making sure that their experiences, opinions and suggestions are appropriately presented and understandable, confirming that was what they wished to communicate, wanting to change or add something. They were asked whether they felt it was appropriate for the text to be published in this form, and whether their privacy was sufficiently protected. It was especially important for us researchers because participant statements are conveyed literally, very long and very personal, and might be easily identifiable. Participants expressed their agreement and satisfaction with the findings, as well as the form of the report and gave consent for the publication of the findings in the presented form. There was further discussion about the recommendations, with particular emphasis on the desires and needs of participants and their offer to continue to participate in various activities aimed at improving the quality of foster care (and awareness of people about foster care) because they think that due to personal experience and strong motivation they can be of great use and help to foster children, as well as foster parents and professionals. Pursuant to the above, it is possible to conclude that this stage of the research was completed with obtaining consent from research participants for the research findings, as well as conclusions and recommendations formulated on the basis of these findings, to be presented to the public.

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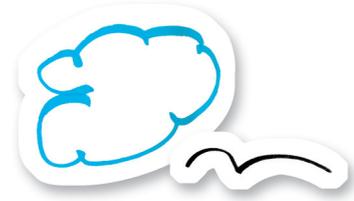
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8 Appendix



8.1 Interview Drafts

➔ a) Interview with foster child/adolescent

Introduction:

Introduction: my name is... I work in... I am a member of the project team...

As a representative of the research team I would like to talk to you about your experiences in foster care. This is necessary so that we can better understand children who find themselves in this situation, and also to help other children in similar situations get through problems they might encounter. There is no other way to learn this except to ask you, who were and are in this situation, for your opinions, perceptions and experiences. We would like to hear from you about how you feel and felt before, what you think about the experience, what you think should be different, better. We will talk to a number of children and young people and we will try to shape our findings into specific conclusions and recommendations for child care professionals and foster families. That is why your experience is very important, of course, if you want to talk to us about it.

You should know that we guarantee that your rights will be protected throughout the process, meaning you will not be mentioned by name, the data will be presented for the whole group, not individually. You do not have to answer every question if it feels inappropriate, difficult or too personal. Also, if you change your mind during the interview, you can withdraw. So, we would like to have your voluntary consent.

The interview will last about an hour, and it must be recorded so that we can transcribe it and let you review it, expand it and so on. If you would like to and if there is an opportunity, we would like you to continue participating in other stages of this project, in particular, we would like to present our results to you (if you want to hear them) and invite you to participate further.

Did you understand everything I told you? Do you have any questions? Would you agree to talk us under these conditions?

Questions:

- Please, introduce yourself in your own way, who you are, what you do, what school you go to...
- What was the course of your life so far? How long have you been living here? Can you tell me where you lived before and what your life was like there?
- Do you know the reason why you were separated from your family? How did you see, hear and experience it at the time? Can you describe your family and what your life was like at the time?
- Do you think it was necessary for you to be separated from your family? In your opinion, was there some other way of resolving the situation? How? What would you gain that way? What would be different?
- How much did you know at the time about the reasons for your separation from the family (leaving the family) and your subsequent placement? Could you describe how everything happened exactly, how did you remember and experience it? Could it have been different? How? Were you ever asked for your opinion? Did you have any opinion on the matter?
- Do you remember coming to this family? Could you describe how you felt at the time, what you were thinking? Did this change over time?
- Introduce/describe your foster family to me. How do you feel in this family? Who do you communicate with the best/most? Why? Describe your relationship with each family member. Who in the family helps you the most with schoolwork, who takes care of you the most, who do you socialize with the most, who do you prefer to talk to if you have a problem? What do you think, how do your foster parents' children accept fostering other children?
- What do you like the most about where you are living now, what bothers you, what would you change? Does anyone ask about your opinions, wishes, suggestions and how often? Are they respected? Do you plan your life in this family together with the foster parents and professionals? Please, describe that further.
- Do you think that your life in the foster family is any different from the lives of other children who live with their birth families? If the answer is yes, then how? What do you gain/lose? Would you change anything? If yes, then what?
- Who do you socialize with the most in the neighborhood, local community, school? How do other people in the neighborhood accept you?
- How do you participate in things happening in your life? Do you feel included and how?
- Could you briefly describe your contacts with your birth family and social services...
- Do you know how long you are staying in this family? Who do you talk to about that? How do you plan and imagine your life in the future? Who do you plan to keep in touch with?
- If you found yourself in the same situation, would you want to be placed in this family again (if yes, why, if no, why)?

- If you found yourself in the situation that you had to participate in the decision about the separation from the family for some other child, what would you do?
- Would you recommend your foster parents and foster family to other children? Would you recommend foster care to others? If yes, why, if no, why? Do you know anything about experiences of any other children in foster care?
- Now, in this situation and with your previous experience, what would you tell and suggest to the professionals and foster parents so that children who are being placed feel good?
- Do you believe today that the decision for your separation from the family and placement in foster care was necessary and good? What would you do in that type of situation, from your position today? How do you see all of that today?
- Is there something that we didn't talk about that you feel is important?
- How did you experience this interview?

Conclusion:

Thank you for the conversation, your time and the trust that you showed me. I hope that we can keep working together. Do you have any expectations of us in the future?

➔ b) Interview with birth children of foster parents

Introduction:

(modified previous introduction, stress the importance of their role, as well as their perspective, experiences, perceptions and suggestions (about foster care of children in their family), and respect for their rights and voluntary nature of participation in the project)

Questions:

- Could you describe your family members? What are your lives and average days like? Do you remember what life was like before your family started fostering children? How old were you? What are your memories of that time, of that first encounter? What happened later?
- Did your parents ask for your opinion regarding the decision about fostering a child/children? Or, when and how did you learn that foster children will come to your family? Do you remember what you thought about it then, how you felt? What was that first encounter like? What happened next? Do you have any suggestions for the professionals or your parents regarding that initial time (maybe something they could have done, paid attention to)?
- How is life in your family different from lives of families that don't engage in foster care (or have no foster children)? In your opinion, how do your neighbors, schoolmates, members of the local community view you and your family? Do you feel like you're losing or gaining something through your status of a child fostering other children, i.e. what did you gain or lose through foster care? How and how much do you participate in the planning of your own life in the family, as well as the whole family's life? How much is your opinion respected?
- What was the best thing that happened to you related to foster care? What was the worst/most difficult? Is there something that you are not satisfied with related to foster care?
- Have some of the children that your family fostered already left the family? If yes, do you remember your thoughts and feeling at the time? What do you think about all of that now? Would you like to have that experience again? Do you feel that birth children of foster parents and foster children should participate differently in family life? How?
- Would you change anything in the entire process? Do you have any thoughts or suggestions?
- Would you become a foster parent when you grow up? If yes, why, if no, why?

Conclusion:

Thank you for the conversation, your time and the trust that you showed me. I hope that we can keep working together. Do you have any expectations of us in the future?

➔ c) Interview with adults with experience in foster care as children

Introduction:

(modified introduction)

Questions:

- Could you introduce yourself briefly, describe how you live today and what your life has been like up to this point (e.g. time line)?
- Do you remember the time of the separation from your family and placement in foster care (if there was more than one placement, elaborate on each one)? When was that, what was your life like before that time? Did you know the reasons for the separation, were you informed or asked prior to the event?
- What was your life like in the foster family? Could you describe your everyday life? What do you remember the most? How did you feel in the family? In your opinion, how did the family accept you (describe your relationship with individual family members? What about your neighborhood and school? Did you feel different in any way from children living with their birth family or the birth children of your foster parents?
- What did you gain in foster care and what do you feel like you have been denied?
- Are you still in contact with someone from the foster family? What is your relationship with your foster family today?
- What was your general experience in relation to the foster family? What about your birth family? Would you suggest anything to professionals or foster parents in similar situations? Would you recommend your foster family to others?
- What was your role in all this, how much were you allowed to participate in your life through participation in decision making and being asked about your opinion? From your current perspective, do you feel it is important to ask children for their opinion? If you had been able to participate in the decisions, would your life have been different?
- Would you (or have you) become a foster parent? Why yes and why no? Would you recommend foster care for some child very close to you?
- Will your experiences in foster care influence the upbringing of your own children in the future, or do they now if you already have children? If yes, how?
- Is there anything significant in your memories and experiences of foster care that we have not discussed? Do you have any questions?

Conclusion:

Thank you for your trust and taking the time to participate in this interview.

➔ d) Interview with children placed in a children's home from a foster family

Introduction:

(modified introduction)

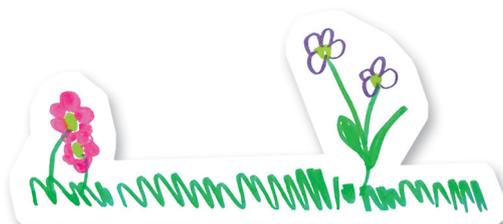
Questions:

- Please, introduce yourself in your own way, who you are, what you do, what school you go to...
- What was the course of your life so far? Can you tell me where you lived before and what your life was like there? (make a time line)
- Do you know the reason why you were separated from your family? How did you see, hear and experience it at the time? Can you describe your family and what your life was like at the time?
- How much did you know at the time about the reasons for your separation from the family (leaving the family) and your subsequent placement? Could you describe how everything happened exactly, how did you remember and experience it? Could it have been different? How? Were you ever asked for your opinion? Did you have any opinion on the matter?
- Do you remember coming to the foster family? Could you describe how you felt at the time, what you were thinking? Did this change over time?
- Introduce/describe your foster family to me. How did you feel in this family? Who did you communicate with the best/most? Why? Describe your relationship with each family member. Who in the family helped you the most with schoolwork, who took care of you the most, who did you socialize with the most, who did you talk to if you had a problem? How did your foster parents' children accept you and other foster children, if there were any?
- What did you like the most about the foster family and what bothered you? Did they ask about your opinions, wishes, suggestions and how often? If yes, did they respect them? Did you plan your life in that family together with the foster parents and professionals? Please, describe that further.
- What was the reason for your placement in the home? Could you please elaborate? What were the reactions of the foster parents, their children, professionals, the home? Did you want to go to a home or did you want to be placed in another foster family? Could you explain your reasons to me?
- Are you satisfied with your decision now? Are you satisfied with life in the home? What did you gain with the change of placement that you did not have in the foster family (and what did you lose)?
- If you found yourself in the same situation again, what steps would you propose?
- If you found yourself in the situation that you had to participate in the decision about the separation from the family for some other child, what would you do?

- Would you recommend your foster parents and foster family to other children? Would you recommend foster care to others? If yes, why, if no, why? Do you know anything about experiences of any other children in foster care?
- Now, in this situation and with your previous experience, what would you tell and suggest to the professionals and foster parents so that children who are being placed feel good?
- Is there something that we didn't talk about that you feel is important?
- How did you experience this interview?

Conclusion:

Thank you for the conversation, your time and the trust that you showed me. I hope that we can keep working together. Do you have any expectations of us in the future?



“This study, rich in both cognitive and emotional messages, thanks to a lively contact with perspectives of different interlocutors, paints a compelling image of the importance of “directing the system to multiple options” which are presented within this type of intervention. Continuing with the visual metaphor, it can be noted that the highlights at the forefront of the lavish murals, painted for us by the authors using a wide variety of research strokes and techniques, are the conclusions that children are competent interlocutors concerning their life experience, and that this research confirms the importance of informing children about all the key features of potential forms of care, as well as the importance of including children in the planning and decision making at all stages of care.”

From the review: Prof. Vlasta Vizek Vidović, Ph.D.

“Qualitative methodology was utilized, meaning that qualitative methods of collecting and analyzing data were applied. As evident from the gathered data, these methods provided insight into the experience of foster care and allowed us to obtain new and specific knowledge relevant to improving the quality of foster care of children in Croatia through appropriate dissemination of information, preparation, participation of everyone (both foster children and birth children of foster parents) in the process of separation from the birth family, placement in the foster family and aligning life in foster care with the rights and needs of children.”

From the review: Asst. Prof. Maja Laklija, Ph.D.

