

## **ROOTS AND WINGS FOR CHILDREN**

- **Empowering families and networks in securing the therapeutic outcome of foster care**

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### **Warm greetings from the Finnish foster care and Finnish after care**

The purpose of the Koho-project was to develop the after-care. We do high quality work in Finnish foster care, but it's also known that this healing and adjusting therapy during foster care is unfortunately not enough to guarantee children a good future life. For a good life child needs roots and wings, even a child raising up in foster care. To secure the therapeutic outcome of foster care, we need empowered families and networks. That's the why the most important part of after care should be done during the foster care.

We believe that working together with the biological family and the social network of the child increases the chances of successful foster care and after-care. Either the child moves back to his biological family or by his own, in both cases he needs empowered family and network. One has to keep in mind that an authority is only a "paid" attachment.

What would I like you to remember from this short dive into the world of foster care families? I hope to give you an idea of the kind of emotional strain that the fostered children and their networks endure. I hope that you will agree that it is essential to start preparing for life after foster care already from the beginning of the foster care placement. I'll try to describe how the emotional plate of the family and networks of a child placed in foster care look like. I'll describe also shortly our working methods.

Throughout the Koho -project we have been looking for forms of supporting shared parenthood. We have tried out methods and procedures, which support the empowerment of families and networks and aim at a safe and controlled life for the child after the foster care time.

#### How we did this development work?

This development project was administered by the Etappi-group. The Etappi-group is a registered association for the development of child welfare work in Finland specializing in the foster care know-how and services.

In project we had 2 workers. I was working in the project, and Kirsi Lahtinen was the other worker. We were responsible for the work with families and networks. Eight foster care units have participated in the project. The

children's personal coaches from the foster care units have been our work pairs. The activity has covered an area of hundreds of kilometres, covering the fostered children's homes and hometowns and authorities at hometowns. The goal was to ensure that there is people who are commitment to support the child who comes back – sooner or later.

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### What happens to the ATTACHMENT NETWORK OF A CHILD PLACED IN FOSTER CARE?

The events behind a foster care situation are often a distress for the attachment network. In many cases the network has already suffered before the foster care; either it has not been giving enough support to the family, or it may have been burdened with the increasing problems of the family.

Hurt feelings inside the attachment network seem to be part of a fostering process. Relatives may have been meaning well or trying to encourage with their observations and remarks, but the parents of a child with symptoms may have taken this for criticism. Sometimes the network may have given quite tough criticism to the family. "Giving away" a child into foster care often provokes surprise, even revulsion. It is obvious that the network is not aware of all the human factors related to the foster care decision. If they were, it would be easier for them to understand the situation. It is also possible that the environment despise a family who have failed with their child, when it would be vital to offer support and consoling. Parents have good reason to wonder if it is a good idea at all to let the others know that their child is in foster care.

Foster care processes always bring about feelings of guilt and shame. This is why it is difficult to share the distress with others. A foster care situation is comparable to the trauma caused by the death of a child. After the foster care decision has been made, the family must consider, with whom they can talk about it. When there is guilt and shame, it is difficult to talk. When you cannot grieve openly, you cannot get support. Parents may end up not telling even their closest ones. They often want to protect their own old parents. It may be difficult for the parents to tell their own siblings about the situation, and they may end up telling white lies about where the child is. When the secret about the foster care is for some reason revealed, one can only imagine the hurt it will cause. The situation weakens the already fragile network. Sometimes, even if the parents are open about their situation, they will still get hard criticism and dismay instead of the support they need.

Sometimes parents report that it is easier to deny being a parent to avoid having to explain their children's situation to strangers. And what should they put on a job application for example? Can you count having a child placed in foster care as a merit? Many parents end up telling part of the truth; I have a child, but he lives with me only on weekends and holidays.

If you have had the joy of having grandchildren, you know that they are the most wonderful children on earth. When your colleague or your friend becomes a grandparent, you will hear endless stories about amazing, wise and beautiful children. But what if your own grandchild is in foster care? On one hand you are grieving for the failure of your own child, on the other you feel sorry for your grandchild. It is difficult to talk about the fostered grandchild. When you cannot tell, you cannot get support and comfort either. The grandparents of a fostered child live the same trauma as the family, but without an official status and the information and the eventual support it would bring about. Grandparents may often be the positive force in the attachment network, but in their lack of information they may also be a strong disturbance, without meaning to.

There are, and there has been, a large number of authorities in the life of a fostered child. The family may have dealt with systems of children's day care and school, received help from the open social welfare system; the child may have gone through child-psychiatric assessments. The parents may also have their own supporting networks like mental health services and others. During the foster care time the family gets to meet ever more workers and authorities. One of our important observations is, that the customers of foster care have good reason to be quite tired with new authorities. How many times is it reasonable to ask someone to start over the initiation in one's own life?

When the time comes for the planning of the after-care, both the parents and the child often point out that they no longer need help. They do not want to start over with new workers again.

An empowered social network is the safety net of a fostered child and his family. We just must not push a child alone to the world outside foster care. The work with the network always begins with easing the emotional strain and that work should be started at the beginning of foster care.

What does the emotional plate of

THE FAMILY OF A CHILD PLACED IN FOSTER CARE look like?

One of the main reasons behind child protection demands in Finland is the parents' exhaustion. It is usual that the family of a child placed in foster care has gone through very tough times. The parents' own life history may have a lot of difficult events; missing out in the childhood, losing a parent, mental troubles, or just an accumulation of different problems. Many are familiar with violence and divorce. When a child is placed in foster care, the parents' old unsolved traumas get activated, which makes the fostering process even more difficult.

Parents feel shame and guilt, together with feelings of longing and perpetual loss. After a weekend at home, it is sad to let the child go back to the foster care place. It is sad to see the child's empty bed at home. It is sad to wonder about the child's everyday life and not be part of it. They say that they can never really accept the fostering, but have to adjust to it somehow.

Negotiations concerning the child are extremely strenuous for parents. They have to choose a way to deal with the situation; this could be collaborating, hostility, withdrawal, and so on.

In their grief, shame and guilt parents are at risk of feeling that their life is insignificant. Many of the parents we met during the project told us how thoughts of ending their own life occupied their minds at times. The love for their child was usually the thing that helped the parents get over their despair.

All parents of fostered children seem to go through a phase that could be called "fighting for the child". This can show for example in the number of procedures engaged to dissolve foster care decisions. Even when parents have asked for the foster care, they cannot escape the need to "fight". They may be content with the foster care place, find the workers of the foster care unit nice, and be happy with the child's adjusting. But when the time comes, when the parents realize that they are now just visitors in their child's everyday life, they usually fear they are losing the child. They may unconsciously start finding fault in the actions of the foster care unit, the professionalism of the workers and so on. In this case, the parents may show their disappointment to the child and to the foster care unit and that may seem like criticism. The parent may also join forces with the child, against the authorities.

How to support relations between siblings? The children of a same family live the same everyday life, but see it from different angles. Where one child is responsible and quietly suffering, another seems to be irresponsible and breaking all limits. Increasing concern makes communication more difficult. This could lead to a very hurtful interaction between siblings. It is difficult to understand the reasons for a sibling's behaviour and reactions. A foster care situation may on one hand enforce the bad roles of the siblings; on the other hand it may make them more concerned about each other. A sister or a brother could nevertheless be a lifelong force and support – a true peer on the way to understanding and outlining one's own life.

The child has experienced life in his own family. He has lived in the emotional environment of his family and lived through the same history as his siblings. But does he have words for talking through his experience? The parents' own processing is important, because it helps them help their child to understand. How can you explain something to your child, if you don't quite understand it yourself? How can he trust the authorities, if the parents criticise them?

### Foster care is also a big trauma for the child: THE EMOTIONAL PLATE OF A FOSTERED CHILD

Moving to live in foster care is a major change of life for a youth. He has to settle down in a new environment and adjust to the rules of his new residence. Often hometown, school and friends change as well. There are many new workers around him. Close relationships loosen up and may even end. It is important to maintain the place in one's own family and a functional role among the siblings. The child's place among relatives and other important attachments needs attention. While in foster

care, the young person can no longer enjoy the everyday life that the rest of the family is living. On the other hand the adolescent may be so worried about his family, parents or siblings that he cannot focus in the everyday life away from home

A lot of emotional strain comes with the foster care of a child. The utmost feelings are those of guilt, shame, disappointment, injustice, being different, longing and often worrying about the family. Most often the child feels that the foster care situation is his own fault. We know; the foster care of a child is based on the law and it has to be strongly justified. There has been lots of talk about things that went wrong.

The child is in a difficult position if the parents are not able to move on from their emotional strain. They can stand in the way of the child's commitment to the foster care. This may for example happen, when the fostering process is very confrontational, or if a parent feels jealous when the foster care unit is raising up their child and they cannot be part of the child's everyday life.

The parents' emotional strain can be so strong, that they cannot be part of shared parenthood for the benefit of the child. These situations are extremely difficult for the child. Who to be loyal to, who to commit to?

In the middle of this emotional strain, the child lives in a jungle of expectations and goals. It would be good to put in words all the feelings, because language is the tool for thought. Fostered children talk about a strong feeling of being different. It may be difficult to find friends at the school of the foster town, because of the different life experience a foster child has compared to the others.

Life events that led to a foster care situation, together with getting used to a shared parenthood, are a major distress for a family. It is important that families of fostered children get help for empowerment. A parent needs help for easing the emotional strain and help for getting used to a new kind of parenting, the shared parenthood. It is important for a fostered child to be present in the process; to put in words his own experience of his roots and of rebuilding his relationship with family and relatives. A child's biological family and relatives are his mirror. It is important for the child to be able to build a self-image, which makes him feel unique and gives him confidence in pulling through. Feelings of guilt are common to the family members and partly to other relatives as well. The most therapeutic way to deal with this is to talk it through together.

Now briefly about the WORKING METHODS which we have used:

Work aimed at the empowerment of families has been the most important of our actions.

It has been about strengthening parenthood and about psychologically attaching the child to the birth family. Home visits have been an important part of the work. The first goal of the work has often been to create a good collaboration between the family and the foster care unit. It is important that the foster care and the family work together in all matters concerning the child. It has also been important to talk through the things that cause distress. We have also been talking a lot of events that contains emotional strain

Very good method has been "Functioning child and family –interventions" which is also called Beardsleen intervention. (It's in Finnish "Toimiva Lapsi ja Perhe interventio" and the letters TLP are coming from that Finnish name). If parents suffer from mental troubles, their child might feel they do not care. The TLP (functioning child and family) -intervention has been an effective way to talk through the problem and to strengthen the factors that protect the child. We have also tried this method successfully in talking through the foster care process. The work has seemed surprisingly easy for the children, because instead of talking about their problems, we have discussed the family's common experience. The work improves the family's internal interaction. 15 workers from foster care unit participating the Koho-project got into a training to learn to use this method!

### Work with the attachment network

In the beginning of the project we imagined that we would be tutoring meetings with the children's attachment networks. In reality, a lot of work for easing the emotional strain is needed before it is possible to start bringing in the network. There has to be a lot of forgiving, of understanding the others' views, before a family is able to start reforming their attachments. How to contact the relatives? How to inform them about the family's situation?

It is also extremely important, to build up a child's identity, that a fostered child should hear stories about his family and, for example, his parents' childhood. It is a big challenge for children in foster care to maintain their status as a member of their birth family.

A lot of work to ease the emotional strain is also needed in the family's relations with the authorities. How to build up this trust? Who to commit to? Another important point is to tailor an adequate authority support for each family.

### Peer support group for parents who have gone through their child's foster care

Eight parents who have gone through the foster care placement of a child participated in our group. The leaders were the two project workers – us - and a mother who had also experienced her child's foster care placement. The participants were surprised at how easy it was to talk in the group. Within the group, it was a normal experience to have a child placed in foster care. It was a big thing to be able to talk without shame and guilt. For many, it was the first time they could openly talk about the foster care. The members of the group were also marvelling at how ordinary people they all seemed to be! The group revealed to be an effective starter for processing their own life.

It became obvious to us that it is a good thing if the leader of the group is experienced, since the group dealt with extremely delicate matters in their discussions. We can now say that the group saw a lot of tears, but also heard lots of laughter!

What happened in the foster care units that participated in the project?  
SPIRIT OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE FOSTER CARE UNITS

It was great to see how keen the units were to try out a new approach in the work. Many of our working pairs got to do their very first home visit, which can be an exciting experience. It was obvious that the workers in the participating foster care units changed their views of children and families. They started to see the presence of families and near ones as a strength. The workers also wanted to develop their working skills. 15 workers enrolled in a one-year TLP – training (Functional child and family intervention) program that our project organized, along with their normal work! Does this not indicate that a change towards a more family oriented approach is taking place?

The units have also started seriously thinking how to secure family work now that the project ends. Some units already work with family therapists and family workers, some are thinking over how to continue the work with the families.

Here are the THREE MOST IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES of our project

Preparations for the after-care have to start right from the beginning of the foster care period. When a decision is made that a child cannot live at home anymore, the family will have gone through events that require lengthy processing. When a lot has been broken, healing takes time. THE CORNERSTONE OF A SUCCESSFUL AFTER-CARE is easing the emotional strain of the family and talking through everything that has to do with the foster care situation. Support is necessary also in getting used to a shared parenthood.

When a foster care decision is made, many authorities have been involved in the family's life. During the foster care placement of a child, there are more authorities to come. We have noticed that families get tired of new people. This is why it is important that the same familiar workers would continue supporting the family across the working sectors. Being well accompanied by their own social worker encourages a family's commitment to the work.

Children are provided with healing and adjusting therapy during the foster care period. This is unfortunately not enough to guarantee them a good future life, if their own attachment network does not support their pulling through. We could say that empowered families and attachment networks are the best guarantee for maintaining the therapeutic outcome of foster care.

**Children need both roots and wings:**

When coming to foster care, a child takes his entire life with him: his experience, his family and near ones – his defencelessness and his dreams.

Already at the beginning of the foster care placement, it is important to try to put in words the child's experience of his roots and to BUILD strong roots

together with the attachment network: an identity, a self image. The image should be one of a person that is good and valuable and loved, and able to cope.

The work for the roots and the planning of the after-care must begin already when the child is placed in foster care. Important and difficult things require a lot of time.

In order to maintain the therapeutic outcome and the life management after a foster care period, a child needs an empowered attachment network.

One has to keep in mind that an authority is only a "paid" attachment.

An authority network alone is not enough to help a child take off and fly towards a good future and the fulfilment of his own dreams.

Life situations that led to foster care and getting used to shared parenthood are a burden to a family. In order to manage the emotional strain, it is necessary to do processing -healing and adjusting - with the family. Family work that is based on purely educational questions, or just on keeping in touch, is not enough.

**Through giving children wings and roots,  
We get them chance to cope with winds and waves.**

I wish you all courage to take in hand the processes of families with children in foster care!

Seinäjoki, Finland

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