

Foster carer experience in Spain: Analysis of the vulnerabilities of a permanent model

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Abstract

Background: The voice of foster families is a valuable tool in the development and improvement of foster family services. Regularly evaluating the satisfaction of foster carers can facilitate the early identification of a range of problems that might pose a risk to the placement. **Method:** This article reports the experience of 200 Spanish foster families (kinship and non-kinship) with foster services in relation to motivation for becoming foster carers, sources of stress and reward, satisfaction with the services and needs. Semi-structured interviews were performed. The aims of the research are principally of a descriptive character, so each group of variables was examined using frequency analysis. **Results:** The foster carers interviewed demonstrated a high degree of satisfaction with the foster programs, although some areas seem more problematic, such as financial compensation, information provided about the fostered child, contact with the birth family and the sensitivity of professionals. **Conclusions:** This study reveals several differences with regard to international literature, that are related to particularities of the Spanish child care system. The results may be extremely useful for the implementation of policy changes which could contribute to raised levels of satisfaction for the foster carers, and increased effectiveness of the programs.

Keywords: Foster care, satisfaction, motivation to foster, needs assessment.

Resumen

La experiencia del acogimiento familiar en España: análisis de las vulnerabilidades de un modelo de acogida permanente. Antecedentes: la voz de las familias acogedoras es una herramienta valiosa para el desarrollo y mejora de los servicios de acogida. Evaluar periódicamente la satisfacción de los acogedores puede facilitar la identificación de riesgos en la acogida. **Método:** este artículo informa sobre la experiencia de 200 familias de acogida españolas (ajenas y extensas) en relación a su motivación para convertirse en acogedores, fuentes de estrés y recompensas, satisfacción con los servicios y necesidades. Se empleó una entrevista semiestructurada. El carácter de este estudio es fundamentalmente descriptivo, de modo que se han empleado análisis de frecuencias para cada grupo de variables. **Resultados:** los acogedores demostraron un alto grado de satisfacción con los programas de acogida. Las áreas más problemáticas fueron la compensación financiera, la información inicial proporcionada sobre el niño acogido, el contacto con la familia de origen y la sensibilidad de los profesionales. **Conclusiones:** se revelan diferencias con respecto a la literatura internacional relacionadas con las particularidades de los servicios de acogida españoles. Los resultados pueden ser de gran utilidad para la implementación de cambios en políticas que podrían contribuir a elevar los niveles de satisfacción de los acogedores y a aumentar la eficacia de los programas de acogida.

Palabras clave: acogimiento familiar, satisfacción de los usuarios, motivación para acoger, evaluación de necesidades.

There are an estimated 14,000 children living in residential care in Spain while they wait for a family (The Childhood Observatory, 2012). In most cases, that family is the child's own family, after recovering from the situation that triggered the protective intervention. Nonetheless, it is well known that in many cases, this is very unlikely. In a recent Spanish study of children with long stays in residential care, only 29% of cases planned to return to the family (López & Del Valle, 2013).

One of the major obstacles to these children's going into a foster family is the scarcity of foster families in Spain and, moreover, the

difficulty of finding families that are available to look after older children or children with health or behavioural difficulties (López & Del Valle, 2013; Sainero et al., 2014).

In response to this situation, sweeping changes to the judicial framework for Spanish child protection have recently been approved, one of the most notable aspects being the prioritisation of family fostering instead of residential care. The reform states that residential stays will not be approved for any child under three years old. In addition, it will facilitate the indication of a foster care placement without the need for judicial intervention and, for the first time, it will regulate the status of foster families with a set of rights and responsibilities for foster carers.

One of the main implications of this legislative reform is the need to increase the pool of foster families to cover all the under-threes who are currently dealt with by the residential care network. The job of recruiting new families, internationally acknowledged as one of the most complex tasks of the protection system (Baum et

al., 2001), must be tackled at a time dominated by scarce resources, both within social services, and in the context of Spanish families, whose reduced economic situations lead to lower probabilities of fostering — 21.6% of the population in Spain are living below the poverty line according to the data of the Living Conditions Survey carried out by the National Institute of Statistics (2013), and the level of unemployment currently stands at 26%.

At a time of such a firm commitment to foster care, it seems more than reasonable to pause and reflect on the response given by the Spanish care services to the people who make this complex intervention possible. This article intends to analyse the experience of foster families from their perspective. Its results might be extremely useful for the implementation of policy changes which will help to improve the level of satisfaction of current foster carers and increase the chances of recruiting future collaborators for foster programs.

Foster care provides a secure family environment and individual attention for children who lack adequate care from their parents. In most cases, the aim of foster care is to reunite children with their birth families, although this is not always possible (Amorós & Fuertes, 2000). Such complex interventions require intensive evaluations to determine the extent to which planned objectives have been achieved and to take informed decisions. The evaluation of these programs through the experience of their users allows their correction and optimisation (Baker, 2007). For example, regularly evaluating the satisfaction of foster carers can facilitate the early identification of a range of problems that might pose a risk to the placement, which may allow intervention when problems surface and improve outcomes.

Despite clear benefits, the analysis of how foster programs are working from the perspective of the users is one of the most neglected activities in the field of child protection (Andersson, 2001; Buehler et al., 2003; Curran & Pecora, 1999; Whenan et al., 2009). In the little available research, the foster care experience has fundamentally been profiled through the exploration of the motivation for fostering, the levels of stress in the foster carers, their satisfaction with the intervention and their needs.

Research into the motivation for becoming a foster carer has highlighted altruism and wanting to help a child as the principal motives (Barth, 2001; Buehler et al., 2003; Denby et al., 1999; Gilligan, 1996; Rodger et al., 2006; Testa & Rolock, 1999). The desire to be a parent and to have a bigger family (Andersson, 2001; Isomaki, 2002) also play a significant role in the motivations. However, payment does not seem to be a crucial factor when deciding to become a foster carer (Kirton, 2001).

Stress levels in foster carers tend to be low, as do levels of depression and anxiety (Cole & Eamon, 2007). The main contributing factors to stress are contact with the birth family, lack of information about the history of the child, not being included in case planning, and the lack of realistic expectations regarding the child (Buehler et al., 2003; Coakley et al., 2007; Jones & Morrisette 1999).

The scientific literature indicates that foster carers are happier when they feel part of the team carrying out the work (Ray & Horner, 1990), when they are actively included in decision making (Sanchez et al., 1998) and when they feel that the placement has a positive impact on their lives (Wells et al., 2004).

Research looking into the needs of foster carers has frequently identified a demand for emotional support, financial assistance, availability of specialist services, more information about the

children, more involvement in decision making, and better training (Brown & Calder 2000; Hudson & Levasseur 2002; Keatinge et al., 2000; Pasztor et al., 2006). The need which is probably most often stated internationally is for more respect and recognition of the role of the foster carer (MacGregor et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2011; Rosenwald & Bronstein, 2008).

Although the motivation, satisfaction and needs of foster carers may be widely explored in other western countries, in Spain the research dedicated to these issues is very scarce and focus almost exclusively on the perspective of kinship carers. See Montserrat (2007) for an overview of Spanish kinship foster from the perspective of the caregivers, the children and the child welfare workers; Bernedo and Fuentes (2010) on the needs of support and satisfaction in kinship care; Jiménez and Zabala (2014) on parental stress and social support of Spanish and Chilean kinship families; Fuentes-Peláez, Amorós, Pastor and Mateo (2015) on the assessment of strengths and weaknesses of kinship carers, and Fuentes-Peláez, Balsells, Fernández, Vaquero and Amorós (2014) on the social support in kinship foster care.

The aim of this work is to shed light on the perspective of Spanish foster families, and to compare results with the international studies presented above via an exploratory analysis of four significant areas of their experience: (a) the motivation to be part of the foster program; (b) the level of satisfaction with fostering services; (c) the most rewarding and the most stressful parts of foster care work; and (d) their needs.

Method

Participants

In the first phase of data collection, 106 foster families responded to a semi-structured interview in 5 Spanish regions (Madrid, Cataluña, Comunidad Valenciana, Galicia and Castilla-León) under the auspices of a nationwide project (Del Valle et al., 2009). Cases were randomly selected from the list provided by the local authority. Later, the same evaluation format was used in another Spanish region (Gipuzkoa), where all of the foster families that were part of the foster program at the time of the study were contacted. In that region, 94 interviews were carried out with kinship and non-kinship foster families. The final number of families interviewed was 200, 44 of whom were kinship carers.

During the first evaluation, five foster carers refused to participate, and during the second, a refusal was given on three occasions, which gives a collaboration rate of 96%. The successful response rate must be attributed to the skill of the interviewers and the cooperation on the part of the foster service personnel when presenting the importance of the research to the families.

The majority of responses were given by the female carers (73.5% of cases, $n = 147$), by both together in 17.5% ($n = 35$) and by the male carer in 9% ($n = 18$).

Procedure

As a preliminary step in contacting the foster carers, the members of the research group sent letters via the foster service which contained the interview script. The letter invited the families to think about the questions in the interview before it took place. The interviews were carried out by four experienced researchers and lasted 1 to 2 hours. They were done in the families' own

houses, in the foster program offices or by telephone, according to their preference or availability. No significant differences were found in the answers from the three methods.

Ethical approval for this project was given by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Oviedo.

Instruments

The levels of satisfaction of the foster carers with the foster programs were obtained using an ad hoc 11-item scale. The scale allowed items to be scored from 1 to 5 (1 = *very bad* and 5 = *very good*).

The remaining items which are presented herein (related to motivation, sources of stress and reward, and the needs of the foster carers) were collected through a series of open questions with the aim of not limiting the foster carer’s responses to a set of predetermined categories. In the analysis phase, the answers were grouped by topic based on the agreement of two researchers.

Data analysis

The aims of the research are principally of a descriptive character, so each group of variables was examined using frequency analysis. The analysis of the open questions was done only on topics which appeared at least five times.

The results are presented together for both categories of foster care, kinship and non-kinship, given that no significant differences were found between the groups with the exception of motivation for fostering.

Results

Motivation for becoming foster carers

The results (Figure 1) identified the desire to care for and protect children as the primary motivation in becoming a foster family, whereas in the case of kinship families, the strongest motivator was the feeling of family responsibility.

Social engagement appeared in third place, followed by the experience of parenting as a motivation. It is necessary to point out that the majority of foster carers who stated this as a motivation acknowledged entering the program after becoming aware of the difficulties of the adoption process.

Other motivations which came up, although at a lower frequency, were loneliness, free time and the offer of an educational experience for their own children.

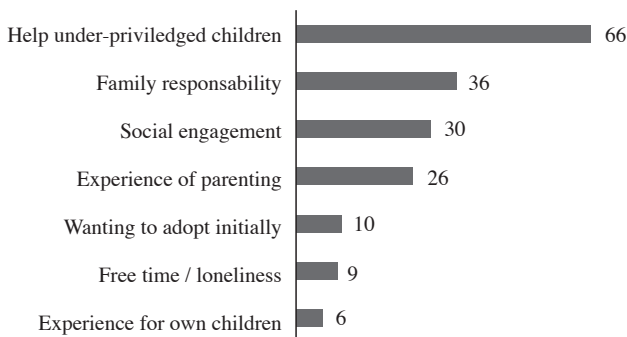


Figure 1. Motivation for becoming foster carers

As expected, monetary compensation for care did not appear in the motivations of the foster carers, as the majority of foster carers in Spain are volunteers, although generally they receive expenses, which average around 300-500 euros per month (Del Valle & Bravo, 2003).

Satisfaction with family fostering services

On average the items under evaluation scored highly, which would indicate a good level of satisfaction with the foster care program (Table 1). The most highly scored aspects were the speed of social workers’ responses when asking for information or help, the level of support from them and the ease of asking and receiving help.

The lowest scoring aspects were related to the quality of information about the child being fostered and financial support.

Most rewarding and most stressful areas

With the aim of better understanding the foster care experience, we asked the interviewees for the areas they found most rewarding and most stressful in their work as foster carers.

The most rewarding factors of fostering found in this research were clearly linked to the initial motivations of the foster carers for joining the foster program (Figure 2). We are essentially talking about the intrinsic rewards of the parental or fostering role, such as being able to see the child’s progress, the affection of the child and sharing life with them. The foster carers also referred to the personal satisfaction of being a foster carer, feeling that the child is part of the family and seeing that family fostering works as a child protection measure.

The impact of the birth family on the child and on the foster family dynamics was highlighted as the most stressful factor for the foster carers (Figure 3), probably owing to the emotional and behavioural consequences that the fostered child often experiences following contact with the birth family (Buehler et al., 2003).

Questions such as how to deal with a child’s special characteristics, the child not being ready to leave at the end of a placement, and doubts of their own capability to look after a child were also frequently mentioned.

Table 1
Satisfaction with family fostering services

	n	Mean	SD
Quality of the information about the child	167	3,275	1,090
Sufficient financial support	179	3,469	1,133
Information received about the fostering process	190	3,773	1,057
Advice about and help with the child’s behavioural problems	175	3,828	1,195
Selection process to be foster carers	187	3,882	0,931
Level of sensitivity of professionals towards the needs of the foster carers	196	3,882	1,321
Level to which professionals bear in mind the opinions and criteria of the foster carers	197	3,944	1,266
Level of sensitivity of the professionals to the needs of the child	196	3,964	1,302
Ease of asking for and receiving help	175	3,994	1,302
Level of support from care professionals when asking for information or help	199	3,995	1,178
Speed of response when asking for information or help	192	4,104	1,143

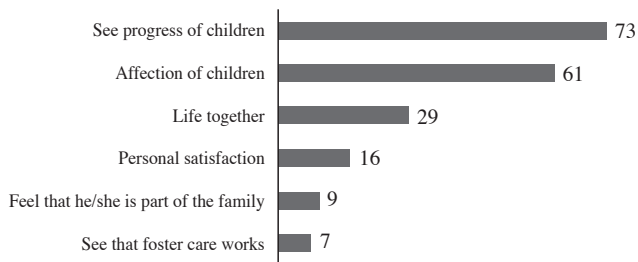


Figure 2. Rewarding parts of their task

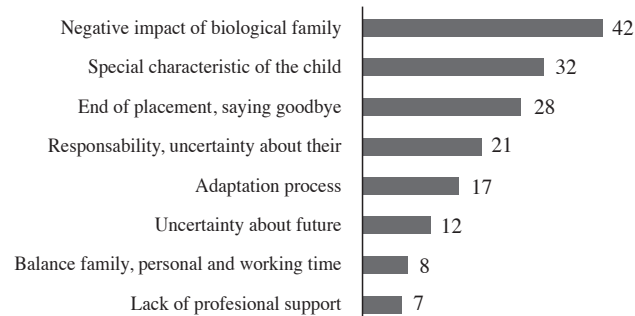


Figure 3. Stressful parts of their work

Evaluation of needs

The foster families expressed their needs in relation to the foster care program (Table 2). From their answers, 26 issues were identified which were organised into four categories: the needs of the foster carers (six issues), the needs of the fostered children (five issues), the needs related to economic aspects of fostering (four issues), and the needs related to fostering services (11 issues).

The foster carers highlighted the need to have more information about the foster children, especially in relation to health and family history which, as many families indicated, are essential to understand the children’s needs and reactions and to ease the process of adaptation. In this sense, some of the foster carers expressed the feeling of being tricked at the beginning of the fostering thanks to some fundamental data regarding the child’s health needs being hidden.

The foster carers expressed the need for more autonomy when taking basic decisions regarding the children, especially in relation to the child’s therapy, trips or holidays, which need consultations, authorisations and occasionally lengthy and tedious form-filling. They also called for more recognition of their opinions when it came to taking decisions about the children’s lives and more consideration of the dynamics of family life when planning parental visits, as they sometimes get in the way of day-to-day activities or disrupt family leisure time.

When it comes to the needs of the fostered children, the foster carers aimed their complaints towards the biological families, stressing the need to prioritise the child’s interests above that of the family. The foster carers also underlined the need to avoid the child being placed in a residential home, the need to better prepare the child for the beginning of a family placement and to maintain some kind of support for fostered adolescents once they reach age eighteen.

In terms of needs relating to economic aspects of fostering, a significant number of carers mentioned the need to improve

financial support, and the creation of additional funds to cope with both special situations or activities for the child (clinical treatment, school support, early childhood intervention, etc.) and the foster families (low income families, grandparents with low pensions, periods of unemployment, etc.). It is notable that no differences were found in this respect between the two types of fostering (non-kinship care and kinship care).

The most important needs about the fostering services were those related to the support and sensitivity of the caseworkers, speeding up processes, simplifying paperwork and providing psychological support services for the children and the families. The foster carers highlighted the high turnover of caseworkers and how such situations tend to harm relationships with the services and damage the children. They also stressed the need for more realistic and specialised training, aimed at the specific needs of the children. The main priority of training for the participants was to learn how to deal with the child’s behavioural difficulties and mental health issues.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm many of the findings concerning motivation, satisfaction and needs of foster carers from the review of international research, although some differences were seen, which seem to be related to the peculiarities of the development of family fostering in Spain.

Table 2
Evaluation of needs

Foster carers' needs	n
More information about the children	23
More autonomy as foster carers	20
To consider their family life when programming visits	11
To consider foster carers' opinion during decision making processes	10
Less intrusive supervision	7
Children's needs	
Supervise family contact	21
Prioritize the interest of the child over the family	16
Avoid stays in residential care	14
Prepare better the child for entering and exiting foster care	9
Maintain support after turning 18	8
Needs related to financial aspects	
Increase financial support	36
Maintain some financial support after 18	10
Financial support for special activities	9
Needs related to the fostering services	
High sensitivity and support from caseworkers	31
Speed up proceedings and simplify paperwork	26
Psychological support services for families and children	25
Stability of caseworkers	21
Improve follow-ups	14
Improve training	14
Raise social awareness about foster care	13
Better assessment of biological family before reunification	12
Improve estimations about placement length	11
Better coordination between services	11

Altruistic motivations, without losing sight of parenthood

The most common motivations for becoming a foster carer are altruistic, related to the desire to have a positive impact on the life of children who have suffered, as well as other intrinsic motivations related to the desire to add a new member to the family. This is in accordance with previous research (Andersson, 2001; Brown & Campbell, 2007; Isomaki, 2002; Whiting & Huber, 2007).

In a study of the experience of Irish foster carers, Gilligan (1996) found that 14.8% of female foster carers and 4.1% of male foster carers evidenced motivation related to wanting more children or wanting to adopt but being unable. Motivations related to family expansion or having more children were found at a level of 19.4% in a study carried out in the state of Iowa by Baum et al. (2001). Nonetheless, intrinsic motivations seem to be much more present among Spanish foster carers. In the case of non-kinship families it is 33% (if we consider intrinsic motivation as those categories related to the experience of parenthood, bigger families, loneliness and experience for their own children). This figure is closer to those found in studies on motivation for fostering in the 1980s; see for example, the British study by Rowe et al. (1984), where intrinsic motivations were reported from 31% of female and 19% of male foster carers.

These results confirm that the level of development of the Spanish foster care system differs from other western countries, and principally corresponds to a quasi-adoptive model (Del Valle et al., 2009). These results also draw attention to possible vulnerabilities in the foster care system; according to Riggs and Willmore (2012), motivations related to experiencing parenthood can result in a greater sense of loss and grief at the end of a placement.

Responsibility and worry for the future

The fact that two of the most significant stressors are related to the responsibility involved in looking after children their future is associated with the way in which family fostering developed in Spain. Various studies have shown how on many occasions cases without prognoses tend to last longer than initially thought (López et al., 2013). In this way the responsibility about the future of the child in care becomes a matter for the foster carers, as they will probably have to decide whether to allow the child to continue living with them after they reach 18 (usually without any financial assistance). In the majority of cases families accept this responsibility, as 90% in kinship care and around 80% in non-kinship care stay with the foster family after reaching the age of majority (Del Valle et al., 2009), demonstrating the strong personal dimension involved in foster care compared to residential care (Kirton, 2001). For those families that decide that the child will stay with them once they reach age 18, the availability of some form of financial assistance should be ensured, especially if the adolescents have special needs or if they have decided to continue in further education or training. Similarly, it would be advisable to assign an after-care social worker who could provide support and advice on the process of requesting assistance or other administrative procedures.

The many faces of support

Technical or instrumental support seems to be reasonably well covered; the caseworkers respond when there is a problem and do

so in a timely manner. However, there is a dimension of support which is being neglected and that is related to the emotional world of the placement. Caseworkers seem to be failing when it comes to making the family feel valued, recognising their opinions or including the foster carers as an essential part of the team for the wellbeing of the child. Previous research has shown how one of the keys to supporting the foster carers in this demanding role is providing the necessary support (Brown & Calder, 2000; Chamberlain et al., 1992; Hudson & Lévassieur, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2003; Rindfleisch et al., 1998) and how unsatisfactory interactions and the lack of communication with social workers can increase the risk of placement breakdown (Pazstor & Wyne, 1995; Rhodes et al., 2003; Trieliotis et al., 1998). It is, therefore, crucial to ensure ongoing support in the most delicate parts of the placement, with special protocols to prepare for the end of the placement.

In addition, the foster carers expressed the need for more specialised support, such as psychology services, to help them face their uncertainties, their feeling of being lost after the placement ends, and the special characteristics of the child being fostered. Abundant scientific literature has noted the special characteristics that fostered children may present (for example, Heflinger et al., 2000; Tarren-Sweeney, 2008) and which require the development of "extraordinary parenting" on the part of the foster carers. These challenges could make the foster carers feel unprepared to cope with the placement (Kerker & Dore, 2006) and could increase their stress levels and anxiety (Cole & Eamon, 2007; Farmer et al., 2005; Jones & Morrissette, 1999; Wilson et al., 2000).

The foster carers may find a major source of support in informal interventions, which have been shown to be a protective factor against placement breakdown (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001). Some authors have suggested employing mentoring foster carers and foster carer associations to provide information and support, especially to new foster carers, which could increase how long foster families stay in the foster care program (Rhodes et al., 2001). Involving experienced foster carers in training new families may also contribute to them feeling more valued within the program (MacGregor et al., 2006).

Money is also important

The need to improve financial support for fostering was the most often heard requirement. The financial support that foster carers receive in Spain is not considered a salary, but rather a compensatory payment of expenses incurred as a result of fostering. Accordingly, in the needs evaluation, one may see how the request to increase financial support is directed towards the needs of the foster children (clinical treatments, school support, extracurricular activities, etc.) rather than the foster carers own remuneration. Foster carers' remuneration has traditionally been seen as a critical step on the way from a quasi-adoptive to a professional model of fostering (a vocation or a job) which has yet to arrive in the Spanish context; the foster carers who were interviewed were more inclined to the traditional or voluntary model rather than the professional, judging by their requests in relation to financial aid, and by their motivation for fostering, which, as stated, is frequently related to parenthood.

In order for foster programs to work properly, there must be adequate financial aid for the specific needs in each case, accompanied by additional resources for special situations. Specifically, considering the fragility of the Spanish labour market

at the moment, we believe contingency plans need to be developed for cases where foster carers have lost their jobs (a situation which has been reported in the interviews), in such a way that it does not mean the end of the foster placement.

Participation, information and training, for foster carers and the children

The foster carers have asked that their voices be heard when taking decisions about the life of the child, especially when these decisions affect family life. In this sense, the research affirms that those foster carers who participate in the planning of service provision are more satisfied (Sanchirico et al., 1998).

The lowest scoring aspect of the foster families on the scale of satisfaction with the services (also frequently mentioned as one of the foster carers' needs) is the information they received about the foster child. Information of this kind provides the families with strategies to understand the specific reactions of the fostered child, as well as to ease the adaptation process. Social workers must distinguish between necessary information for working with the child and unnecessary information or that which might invade the privacy of the biological family or the child. When social workers decide to conceal or soften information, they may make the foster carers feel as though they are not trusted enough to be given all of the information about the child (MacGregor et al., 2006). Furthermore, having sufficient information about the child has been shown to be a factor in reducing the risk of breakdown (Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001).

Lack of preparation affects also the child. Becoming part of a foster family is an event which may cause significant confusion in the child (Andel et al., 2012). How the child understands and interprets this experience plays a key role in moderating its impact (Mitchell & Kuczynski, 2010). Social workers must meticulously prepare the transition to a family placement by offering adequate explanations which are appropriately adapted to the child's development, saying why it is necessary to live with another family as well as the possible outcomes.

Ties to the birth family

The reference to the birth family as the most stressful aspect of fostering and the various needs mentioned in relation to supervision of contact or reunification with the birth family suggests negative attitudes amongst the foster families and rejection of the idea of reunification. Previous research has indicated foster families' negative attitudes towards reunification (Erera, 1997; Hudson & Levasseur, 2002) and the fact that foster carers associate the birth family with bad or inadequate parenting (Butler & Charles, 1999; Miedema, 1999; Mosek, 2004). In the face of these attitudes, it would be useful for social workers to provide better training to the foster carers about the positive long-term effects for the child of maintaining contact with the birth family.

Conclusions

Although levels of satisfaction with fostering programs are generally high, the foster carers gave lower scores to the information received initially about the children and financial support. The most highly scored aspects of fostering were the speed of response and the level of social worker support when asking for information or assistance.

The needs which were most often perceived as not sufficiently met were the increase of financial assistance to cover the costs of bringing up the foster child, better sensitivity and support from the social workers, simpler and faster procedures, the availability of specialised psychological services, better information about the fostered children, and help dealing with the biological families.

The results of this study raise a number of significant implications for practice. Primarily, it identified deficiencies in the support and training of foster carers. One of the most important challenges for the development of foster services in Spain will be finding creative ways to make maximum use of the intrinsic benefits of foster care, and reducing the deficiencies that have been found, at a time when resources are scarce. While being aware of the limitations of improvement, we believe that by making the foster services and its professionals more aware of the needs and experiences of the foster carers, we can improve the sensitivity and empathy of the professionals towards the families, which was shown to be one of the most significant needs in this study.

The success of a foster program does not depend exclusively on the foster carers but also on the professionals who work in it and, among other things, the support that they offer. It is essential that social workers are conscious of the factors which contribute to a positive fostering experience. Therefore, the content and implications of this study are vitally important for social workers and offer guidelines on how to improve interventions with foster families.

Finally, the main virtue of this exploratory study is in the use of individual interviews with a significant number of foster carers from many parts of the country. Furthermore, this work might make a valuable contribution to research that has been carried out in Spain from the perspective of the foster carers, which, with notable exceptions such as Amorós et al. (2009), Montserrat (2007) or Bernedo and Fuentes (2010), has been scarce.

Due to its exploratory nature, the study presents various limitations related to the generalisability and reliability of the results. Although the response rate is impressive, it may be associated with the fact that families had the impression that this was part of the social worker contact and they may have perceived the participation as compulsory. The interview script was sent to the foster carers before the interview and that could make the answers less spontaneous and authentic.

Far from being definitive, the results open new lines for future research which include a more sophisticated methodological approach. For example, this study did not explore differences due to gender. Previous work has suggested that there are differences between male and female foster carers in their motivation for fostering (Gilligan, 1996) and in the factors which affect their satisfaction (Myers & Crockett, 2012). Nor was the influence of experience included, despite various studies which have demonstrated how satisfaction increases over the time of a placement (Cautley, 1980). One key question to ask in future research is which aspects of satisfaction are related to the best results of the placement. Are better results achieved by foster carers who are more satisfied with the services?

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