



Needs Analyses Report

Interviews – Focus Groups – Desk Research

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**Cooperation aimed at the child in a foster family.
An analysis of needs/expectations of biological families, foster families, and
social workers**

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Initial remarks

The final report of the first stage of the FALEFOS – Family Learning in Foster Families project, Lifelong Learning Programme, includes the presentation of the results of research into the needs/expectations of three categories of persons undertaking the task of supporting the development of children placed in foster families. The issue that has become a particular analysis object in the report concerns the leading idea of FALEFOS, which is cooperation between foster parents, biological parents and social workers, aimed at the child in the foster family, and the children’s chances to go back to their biological parents. The FALEFOS – “Family Learning in Foster Families” project refers to the thesis that children have a right to contact their biological parents when they are placed outside their natural families. The project clearly emphasises the cooperation of foster and biological families of the child with social workers, and stresses the fact that the child’s stay in a foster family can be temporary.

The report has been prepared based on the information gathered during individual interviews with foster parents (5 families from each of the countries), biological parents (5 families from each of the countries) and social workers (5 from each of the countries) as well as focus group interviews (one in each of the countries), the participants of which were people from the categories mentioned above and experts (in Poland they were people running family-type children’s homes or working in foundations aimed at children placed outside their families). The report contents refers to research questions formulated in the “Needs Analysis Methodology”. The main issue was formulated in the form of two questions: What are the needs/expectations of biological families, foster families and social workers in relation to cooperation aimed at the child? And what is the cooperation between social workers, biological parents and foster parents in relation to children placed in foster families? On the other hand, the detailed issues concern the following questions: What are the socio-demographic features of the persons researched? What are the reasons for placing children in foster families? What are the relationships between biological families, foster families and social workers? What

difficulties do biological parents, foster parents and social workers face in their mutual relationships? What are the relationships between children placed in foster families and their biological families and social workers according to the adults researched? Which institutions/centres/persons do foster parents, biological parents and social workers cooperate in relation to children? What are the expectations of biological parents and foster parents of social workers? What are the proposals of activities aimed at the cooperation between biological families, foster families and social workers?

The method of a problem monograph makes it possible to recognise the manifestations of the involvement of biological families, foster families and social workers in their cooperation aimed at children, successes and difficulties related to this cooperation, their expectations and possible changes. A problem monograph is a kind of a qualitative research method that allows to describe the issues identified, taking into consideration the worldview of people taking part in individual and focus group interviews.

The report takes the form of a description of the information gathered. Drawing up the report based on the information gathered in different countries is not an easy task from the methodological point of view. The diversity of cultural, legal and system contexts in relation to the care of children in different countries makes it difficult to analyse the data. The monograph method allows to describe cooperation and the expectations of the persons interviewed. Thus, an attempt has been made to prepare a description of the information gathered so that it is useful for preparing a characteristic of one selected (emphasised) issue of the FALEFOS project, which is the cooperation of adults aimed at children in foster families, in order to determine recommendations for the further stages of the FALEFOS project in relation to the issue analysed.

The results of the analysis of expectations of the researched categories of persons indicate both difficulties in the cooperation between adults (social workers and parents) aimed at children placed in foster family environments and the possibilities of creating conditions that would allow them to acquire skills related to cooperation between biological families, foster families and social workers aimed at

children, in order to optimise the conditions of the children's development and the possibility of their return to biological families.

Such a small research sample only allows for careful data analysis. However, the collected data allow us to prepare characteristics of the cooperation between foster families, biological parents, and social workers. It should be emphasized that the results only represent regions and show the subject of the cooperation between parents and social workers on the basis of opinions of people participating in the interviews. The situation of each country is presented individually due to different solutions used for the cooperation.

1. Children in foster families – an outline of the selected characteristics of the child's development

This section attempts to characterise the features of the child's development indicated during individual interview by parents and social workers.

The reasons why children are placed in foster families, such as: neglecting the child's needs, domestic violence, bad relationships with the mother's partner, parents' psychological and physical disease, difficult living conditions, crime, addictions, broken families, are mentioned by parents from most of the countries where information about the expectations of foster and biological parents was gathered. Based on an analysis of the biological parents' answers, one can also point to poverty, unemployment, the child's disease, difficulties in fulfilling parental roles, difficulties in reconciling work and taking care of children, inability to deal with life, and single parenthood. In biological families, one can often find several of the reasons listed above.

Foster families who took part in the research bring up, among others, children of parents of Romani, Moroccan and Turkish background.

The answers of Polish, Romanian and German foster parents concerning the children's past point to their previous stay in other care facilities. Some children

stayed in the hospital, other foster families or children's homes. Foster parents reveal the signs of the children's negligence in children's homes (dirty clothes, diseases, loneliness), clearly negative effects of the children's stay in the previous facility, the children are hungry, dirty, nervous, ill, immature for their age, their weight is too low and they have health problems. According to one of the parents, the children already have a lot of difficult experience gained in their biological families and different facilities taking care of them.

Foster families accept both unknown children and, in fewer cases, children they have already known before (distant relatives, children of friends). In the case of unknown children, before the child is placed in a foster family, some meetings are arranged. For example, in Poland this means a meeting of the foster parents and the child in a facility (a children's home, a kids shelter), in Germany – in a stand-foster family with a biological parent present or a visit of the child and a social work at the foster family's house. The foster parents' descriptions of their first meetings with the children allow to assume that the children experience strong emotions, curiosity and excitement ("an electrifying meeting") as well as mutual affection, and that adults undertake activities aimed at supporting the children – asking them whether they would like to visit a foster family, calm initiation of relationships over several weeks/months.

Biological families can exist in the children's memories, and they can be present in their everyday lives. However, the presence of biological parents in the lives of the children is not always possible, the children can treat their foster family as their only family environment (as one of the Romanian foster parents said: "the children are small, so it can be said that they were born in this family"). Several infants were placed in Romanian foster families. One of the social workers emphasises that in such situations one should offer the children a possibility of "getting to know their background, roots", "getting to know the name of their biological mother". When the child reaches preschool age, the social worker "attempts to explain the situation". According to foster parents from Italy and Switzerland, the children know their stories and problems of their biological families well. Sometimes

they also look for a justification for their family situation in external conditions and not in their parents.

As social workers taking part in interviews in each of the countries believe, the children miss their parents, they idealise them, they diminish their parents' faults and conceal the reasons for staying with foster families, they want to meet their parents more often, they are very attached to their mothers or love their fathers "more than anything". Some children believe in the possibility of reintegration and returning to their biological families. The answers of social workers and foster families also point to the fact that the children are often angry when they can't maintain contacts with their parents, they behave vulgarly, they don't want to meet them, they blame them for lack of love and "a normal home", they are ashamed of their parents and their traditional clothes (a Romani child), they compare their lives in foster and biological families and identify the problems of their families. According to the data gathered, children are able to distance themselves from their biological parents and evaluate them more critically, but at the same time they experience a loyalty conflict (in relation to their biological and foster parents) and they feel abandoned.

According to the opinions of foster parents and social workers from individual countries, the children speak of their biological families in both positive and negative terms; some want to talk about them, while others avoid it. Foster parents can create conditions allowing them to talk to the children about their biological families and they attempt to do it. As the analysis of the answers indicated, they do this when the children ask questions and want to talk.

In all countries, the answers of foster parents reveal a certain course of the children's adaptation: "At the beginning, it was hard, she could not sleep (a girl placed in a foster family), she had nervous system disorders, we couldn't sleep for weeks. Now she's quiet and calm, her sight's improved". "The boy is a very good student, he took part in a competition to create an interactive toy and won the first place award. He attends additional classes, he's got some deficiencies but he works very hard."

During the children's stay in foster families, there are also situations which can be described as follows: in the beginning of their foster care, foster children go

through another circle: they feel being mistreated, get angry, are disappointed, blame everybody. Some children feel their helplessness but react not with aggressive behaviour towards others but rather towards themselves or they get very lethargic, depressive.

According to social workers, despite the fact that the children are often physically and/or psychologically hurt by their biological parents, they often hope that they will come back to their family homes in the near future. However, social workers also emphasise that the children often treat foster families as sources of care and safety, they use the words “mum, dad”, “aunt, uncle”, some of them want to stay in the foster family forever, they treat it as their own family, they love the foster mother and her children, they adore and respect their parents. On the other hand, teenagers reveal rebellious behaviour towards foster parents, the children “experience a conflict, as they feel they are not loyal to their biological parents”, they are closed in relationships with their foster mothers.

According to the research participants, the children in foster families can live in safe and favourable conditions, they become more open, cheerful, their self-esteem grows, their negative emotions are pushed into the background. Foster families guarantee them good financial conditions, preventive healthcare, and support for their education. According to social workers and biological parents, children in foster families have better conditions for development, and particularly living and housing conditions, than in biological families they lived with before they were placed in foster families.

Social workers from Switzerland also point to the fact that the children see their foster parents as stricter than the biological ones, “especially if the foster children weren’t used to feel the consequences of their misbehaviour”. The children also tell social workers that they appreciate the activities (e.g. swimming, playing, hand craft etc.), the care and trust of their new homes. They like having less sorrows and more peace of mind, they talk about more space for their own: they often have their room and their pocket money.

As the Polish foster parents emphasise, the foster children are equal family members who, for example, take part in making decisions about the ways of

spending free time and solving difficult situations, such as truancy. The problem is discussed with the child and the whole family looks for a way to solve it.

Biological parents believe that the children are ambitious, creative, emphatic, sensible, motivated to achieve their goals, that their health improves just like their emotional and social development, and school results. The analysed answers of biological parents also point to developmental problems of children placed in foster families: problems establishing contact with the child, crying, rebellion, children avoid meetings with their parents, they are self-contained, the trust is lost, “relationships that can’t be made up for”, the children don’t want to hug their mothers, “everything’s gone”, according to one of the mothers, the trust between her and the child has been distorted by the foster care. The child has problems sleeping, bad dreams, some problems with his/her leg, heart, breathing, the child’s behaviour (hitting, anger) is incomprehensible, the child has been through things that can’t be forgotten.

Foster parents and social works also draw attention to the fact that children sometimes have serious behavioural problems: they lie, they are drug addicts, they are aggressive towards their foster parents and social workers (usually it is verbal aggression but there are also cases of physical violence, for example in the case of children with ADHD and deeply disturbed children, e.g. those with borderline personality disorder). They also reveal serious emotional problems, while biological parents think they become selfish and lonely, which also has an influence on their school results. There are cases when biological parents feel responsible for the children’s problems and helpless in the face of this situation.

Summary

Preparing a summary for the analysis of answers of respondents from different countries where different legal regulations are in place and where the organization of the cooperation between families and workers is different is not an easy task. Therefore, in the summary of the report we will focus on similarities that might become inspiration for the further stages of the Falefos project.

The reasons for a child to be in foster care are complex. Such circumstances as poverty, unemployment, violence, neglect, sole parenthood, and addictions often

coincide in a biological family. In each country children entering foster care have problems related to biological, social, emotional and cultural development. As they are staying in a foster family, such developmental problems are reduced, however new problems appear when they are adolescents.

Children miss their biological parents; they hope to return to them. People that participated in the interviews pointed out to the right of a child to stay in touch with his/her biological parents being respected, however not without certain difficulties. Children staying in foster families have the possibility to get to know their biological parents if they were taken to foster care as babies, they can stay in touch with their biological parents and talk about them with their foster parents.

2. Cooperation¹ between biological families, foster families and social workers in the countries researched

Introduction

An overview of the analysis of secondary source studies, a desk research, made as part of learning about the conditions of cooperation shows that the subject of cooperation between biological and foster parents, with support from social workers, is underlined in legal regulations of each country. Legislature in the project partner countries underlines the right of a child to be brought up in his/her biological family. It is also emphasized that a child's stay in his/her foster family should be temporary. A synthetic description of the desk research reports shows that:

- Italian regulations define the relations between the biological and foster families, and social workers. Biological parents are described as active participants of foster care over their child; their opinion is important for the foster parents.

¹ Cooperation is understood as the ability to establish relationships and pursue goals together with others, which in this case concerns conditions favouring the children's development both in their biological and foster families. Referring to the Polish literature, R. Wroczyński believes that cooperation of units or groups of people who perform fragmentary tasks is aimed at reaching a common goal. Wroczyński R. (1979), *Pedagogika społeczna*, Warszawa, PWN.

- In Austria foster parents are obliged to cooperate with the biological family, to respect their rights, and to support the relationship between them and their child.
- In the Polish legislature it is emphasized that the biological family should be supported, with its consent and active participation. Such support for the biological family is provided both at the time it experiences difficulties and in a situation when a child has to temporarily stay outside the family, for example in a foster family. Then working with such a family might make it possible for the child to return to his/her biological parents. However, the procedure of cooperation between the two families – the foster and the biological one, is not described in detail.
- In German legal regulations the biological parents' right to access their children is a component of the Parental Rights, found in Article 6 Section Two of the Constitution and thus constitutionally guaranteed. Exchanges between the two families should be possible without large problems and both sides should be understanding for the other. The roles of the participants should be clear – “This one is Mama, the other is Mother”. Foster parents are to participate in the planning. Biological parents are entitled to participate in the planning.
- Romanian legal regulations are clearly recognizing the child's right to grow up in a family environment, favoring biological family and the support of children in need. Analysis of secondary sources shows that there is no specific procedure developed on the aspect of maintaining relationships between biological parents and children. Many children are staying in a foster family since birth.
- In Swiss regulations it is emphasized that every child must be granted a safe and secure environment to grow up in, an environment which will build up and support the child's personality and self-confidence. In an analysis of secondary sources related to the situation of a child in foster care in Switzerland UN Conventions Article 3, children's rights are quoted.
- In Croatian legal regulations, according to Article 43 of the Law on Fostering, expert staff of the Social Welfare Centre of the child and the foster parents together plan and prepare the child/young person for leaving the foster family in order to return to their own family. Practical experience demonstrates that placing a child outside his/her family decreases the level of intervention in the family itself, which leads to

situation of less frequent cases where the biological family of the child has enabled conditions for his/her return into the family, leading to children spending longer periods in foster care accommodation.

2.1. Austria

Foster families. Interview participants are most often married (one person was divorced). Some of them have their biological adult children. Foster families are both multi-children foster families and related or non-related to the foster child who usually accept one or two children. Foster families has functioned for 2-12 years. The parents have decided to set up foster families because they want to help children (they “wanted to give other children the chance to grow up in a fortunate family”) and to use their parental experience (“instead of own child, wanted to give children love and values”) or professional background (foster mother had been trained to become a childminder – a day nanny), or because they don’t have children on their own and they want to fill the void in their lives. In one case foster parents were related to the child and they had been looking after the child at weekends since it was born. Talking about the moment the children came to foster families, parents mention both positive (joyful expectance) and negative emotions (imminent danger) they experienced. When they were preparing to the role of foster parents they took part in training for foster parents, and they also had conversations with other foster parents, and were members of an association of foster parents. They informed their extended family about their decision and met with great scepticism, criticism regarding visiting contact with biological parents. They believe that when children are placed in foster families, the children’s age should be taken into consideration (“it should fit into the family structure”) and biological families should be supported. The starting of a foster family entailed numerous changes in the life of foster parents. Mostly, they believe that it is a “gain for the family and you stay young yourself”. Their fears concern mostly maintaining relationships with biological families, supporting children separated from their families and fulfilling their duties (such as helping the children with school tasks) but they do not experience any difficulties in their relationships with children. They

believe that as foster families they have achieved the goals related to support and a change of the situation of the foster children (“foster children know where they belong and have a place in the family”, the child “had suffered from developmental delay and she has made much progress”, “they learn to live independently and are able to cope with their life backgrounds”). The parents strongly believe that the children have experienced a number of positive changes: “the child is integrated in the family like a biological child, grows up in a normal family, and is accepted by everybody”, “there is better awareness of the child's needs”, attention, relaxation and safe care, and somebody is there for the child. Foster parents think that they should talk to the children about their situation from the very beginning and, if possible, they should maintain contact with their biological parents or extended family. They also point to differences between their family and the children's biological families (educational difference, children perceive a material/financial difference, mental disease, biological mother has many children, has never had a job) but, if possible, they maintain regular, personal or telephone contacts with the biological parents. They also mention that the children expect their biological parents' involvement (children expect from their biological family to get a gift for Christmas) and want to have contact with their siblings. Further, they ask questions that are difficult for the foster parents: “Can I love two mothers?” “Should I be sad because I live with the foster family?”, or “Can I be happy? Why don't I live with my mother?”.

One of the foster parents is of an opinion that time should be given to the child arriving at a new family. Foster parents and the child should have time to get used to each other, visits by biological family are very irritating at the beginning. Contacts (if at all necessary) should only be maintained between foster parents and biological parents, and direct contact with the children only after 6 months.

The contacts between foster families and social workers are in most cases maintained over the telephone (once a year there is a home visit), they are usually assessed as good because social workers are available as contact persons and they provide good support for visiting arrangements. Their task is also to ask whether foster child can stay till the Court has decided, but appointment at Court to decide whether foster parents can take foster child. Foster parents expect support

concerning authorities, school, when there are questions and concerns. They also mention that the social space system is irritating because you don't know the name of the responsible person, a social worker can also become more acquainted with foster family and more available.

Foster parents believe that the child's return to the biological family works only when planned from the beginning and when there is a permanent contact with biological parents (every week). The social workers should have a uniform attitude with regard to the foster care system.

According to social workers, foster families are open and tolerant, they do not impose pressure on themselves to make no mistakes, they have a relaxed, natural approach regarding their role, congruent behaviour and presence for the foster child.

Biological families. They consist of lonely persons, but they are also single parents (e.g. a mother with children or even grandchildren) and reconstructed families (with a different partner). The reasons for placing children in foster families listed by biological parents include numerous problems, such as financial difficulties, lack of skill or involvement in the care of the child (focus on oneself and problems), mistreatment of the child (the mother shouted at the child, pushed it), psychological problems, drug problems. When analysing the development of the situation in the biological family, the respondents said in order to avoid placing the child in foster care, certain changes would have to take place, including regular working hours and more money, own flat, childcare. They think they were too young, had lots of problems (alcohol, drugs, bad contacts), did not have experience in raising a child and they needed support in the performance of their duties (assistance for preparing the meals, for changing the diapers, washing etc.), involvement of their relatives (the child's father should have felt more responsible, not take sole responsibility for child) and specialist care that would provide them with stability (therapy).

Biological parents know little about their children (their answers are short: they go to the kindergarten, they have a good job even though they used to have problems at school) or they don't know anything about them. Only one person

believes she knows everything about the child because the foster mother provides her with such information, particularly in relation to education and achievements (the child is very clever). This results from the fact that when their child is placed in a foster family, biological parents take no part in the care, they don't maintain any contacts with their children, while the only source of information about them is the foster family. Only one person said that she visits her child once a month, during Christmas and on birthdays but she doesn't feel like a mother (The child doesn't talk to me much. And I don't talk much to the child. We don't talk over the phone. I think the child can't. Or, perhaps, it doesn't want to. Sometimes I don't feel at all that I'm its mummy. Actually, I am only a visitor or an older friend).

Most biological parents don't maintain contacts with social workers. When they talk about meetings with them, they are related to taking the child to a foster family and arranging the schedule of visits. One person mentioned frequent (weekly) contacts initiated by the social worker at parent's counselling, when there were problems with the children who live in the same household (problems and progress are discussed).

Biological parents don't know who could help them get their children back to the family. They supposed no one (it's up to the child whether it wants to return) or the authorities, Youth welfare office, the social worker and foster mother (they must also provide support for the child to be able to leave again). However, they say that in order for the child to return home, they need to provide the child with good material conditions (a job, more money, a flat), they have to maintain frequent contacts with the child and the foster mother, obtain help related to running the household and solving their previous problems. Almost none of the biological parents researched want their children to return home because of a change of their situation: splitting up with a former girlfriend (I'm not interested in the child because I'm not interested in my former girlfriend), starting a new family (when I got married again and got two more children I no longer wanted it, and neither did my husband, I wanted to leave the past behind), lack of conditions that would be appropriate in their opinion (I can't bring up the child on my own. I wouldn't manage. That's too much for me. I'm not good enough for that). Only one person is considering such an option as long as it is

the child's decision. She thinks that she also needs the approval of the social worker and the foster mother (the biological mother wouldn't want to do it against her will), and that she would need a real job, a bigger flat and no problems. Most biological parents don't undertake any activities aimed at getting their children back (I visit the child because the social worker told me to and because I want to see the child from time to time, find out how it's doing, what it looks like).

Relationships between families. Some biological parents don't maintain any contact with the child's foster family ("I live somewhere else now. I have my own problems; and nobody cares about me getting in touch with the foster family. And I don't want to"), although in some cases, in the first period after the child is placed in a foster family, they visited the child at its new home ("At the beginning, visited every day; and then less and less often"). Two of the biological parents maintain telephone and personal contacts (once a month) with the child and the foster families, and at the beginning, a social worker was also present during these visits to supervise the meetings. Biological parents have no expectations of the foster families and their children. Further, they often emphasise they have no knowledge of the foster family. They suppose the foster parents are professionally trained (vocational education), they say they must live in better conditions and cope better with their duties and bringing up children, and that they have no similar problems.

Social workers believe that in most cases it is the foster parents who are willing to cooperate with biological parents, although much depends "on the foster parent's personality structure".

The tasks of social workers in relation to cooperation with families. The opinion of social workers about the first meeting of the foster parents with the child to be placed in a foster family is the following: "there is no typical first meeting, the people involved are usually very insecure, contacts and conversations are rather reserved and strenuous, the atmosphere is very tense". The people meeting may not know each other or know very little: biological parents, child, foster parents, social worker, people from the association of foster parents. The first meeting takes place in the youth welfare office. The aim of the first meeting is to explain the child's situation

to foster parents, to provide the child with an opportunity to get to know the foster parents (“to give the child the chance to ‘gently arrive’ at the foster family”), to answer the parents’ questions, to make a discussion and watch one another (and particularly the child), to hand over documents (such as the Mother-and-Child-Pass, the birth certificate etc.). During the first meeting the cooperation of adults can begin, or as one of the social workers said: “documents are handed over and the people start networking among themselves”.

Basing on the answers of social workers, it can be said that a social worker clearly has the responsibility for the child, she/he is the supervisory body for all levels. The role of a social worker is limited since the interaction and the meeting between the foster persons and the future foster child take place at the centre of attention. When the contact is positive, the social worker withdraws, when the contact is not so good it is a moderating role, might be also a mediating role.

Mainly, the contacts with the foster family take place as part of the annual supervisory contact of the social worker, which is regulated by law, to observe the development and document it on the basis of a development report. Otherwise, there are contacts if necessary: questions from the foster family regarding visiting contacts (initiating contact or problematic contacts with the biological family), legal or financial questions or the contact is initiated by the authorities (for general reasons and/or to arrange contacts with the biological family, thus contacting the foster family). In addition to the health-related, the psychological and the socio-emotional condition, resources and issues are addressed to be able to develop a joint assistance plan with new perspectives.

Social workers expect that a foster family is a supportive family that provides the possibility for the foster child to unfold according to his/her needs and abilities, also respects the situation of the biological parents and does not deplore them. The foster family is open to cooperate with the authorities, passes relevant information to the social worker and is prepared to learn, attend appropriate training courses. They also emphasise that they should have more time for working with foster and biological parents.

Further, social workers say that generally, there is regular contact when under-age children are in the families, but it depends on whether there's willingness to co-operate and whether the child's return is being thought of. Practical co-operation and contact depend on the individual case, there is a range from no contact at all to intensive co-operation. Basically, the first day of out-of-home care is also the first day when we start to work on the child's return to its biological parents. This contact is also maintained whether it is to discuss issues of a legal or material/financial nature, to settle visiting contacts or - in case of a visiting ban - to inform the biological parents of the child and his/her development at agreed intervals. Social workers emphasise that there are a lot of problems in biological families, but they would like biological families to cooperate with the authorities for the benefit of their own child, do not make the child feel guilty and do not cause a conflict of loyalty, comply with agreed visiting arrangements and reflect that visiting contacts not as a competition. Social workers believe that they should have more time to discuss and reflect on the child's foster care with the biological family and more time to be able to develop future perspectives and solution strategies. They also mention professional support for the biological family to reflect experienced placement and to work out, together with the family, possibilities to stabilise the family system.

Social workers also list numerous reasons for placing children in foster families (abuse, neglect, violence, squalor, mistreatment of the children, mental illnesses, diseases and addictions of the parents/one parent) as well as examples of situations which make it impossible for foster families to fulfil their tasks (foster family does not cope with their tasks and feel overstrained or not up to the task, foster parents have a crisis situation, there are massive incidents with the foster parents, e.g. abuse, maltreatment or foster child says she/he doesn't want to stay in the foster family – this kind of situation must be verified).

They believe that in their work the most useful are the skills in counselling and strategies in conversation techniques, empathy, sensitivity, openness, understanding, being able to listen very carefully to find out who wants what, and also clarity, appreciation, legal knowledge.

According to them, cooperation between families (foster and biological), the child and social workers depends on transparency on all sides and from all parties (history, expectations, conditions), but focus must lie on the best interests of the child, clarity about the various functions and tasks of the various helpers (there must be a clear procedure and willingness to cooperate), respectful treatment of all, respect for the different roles. The child has a chance to return to the biological family, if parents have managed to become stable, are able to offer the child a safe, steady relationship and structure, thus ensuring the best interests of the child and the child itself wants to return.

All social workers believe that knowledge of children and their situation is particularly important, as the authority that is responsible for the placement, because the foster place is selected according to the child's history, in order to assist the child in its development it is important to know what experiences it has already made, important for potential psychotherapeutic treatment/care. It is also significant from the perspective of the child's biographical work: it is essential to work on your own biography to be able to come to terms with the usually difficult biography of children in foster families. Experiences from the times before can, as long as they are dealt with in the correct context, increase the child's self-esteem and, thus, contribute to positive development. This process (dealing with your own past and adequately dealing with the impressions from those times) can create clarity when dealing with precarious or idealised fantasies, for example.

Social workers say that they focus on the needs of all groups, mediate between them. They prepare information and communication in terms of case management: who needs what kind of information (to the best interests of the child), who needs additional support and in what form. They arrange visiting right, make role of the decision-maker (protection and clarity), organisational function (supervising visits) and advisory, supporting function, conversations and conflict settlement.

They emphasise that when they perform their duties, they are supported by their colleagues as part of case reviews or conversations, psychological officer, foster parents counselling and by associations of foster parents, they can get in touch at the weekly social space team meeting, through the responsible persons for the

respective care place at A: PFL and through the department for foster children. They further believe that what is very usefully during the performance of their tasks is clear information on legal issues (from the authority-based lawyer), possibility to reflect within the official team of colleagues and if necessary (e.g. if the biological parents ultimately reject the social worker for taking their child into foster care), change of the social worker to be able to develop cooperative structures.

2.2. Switzerland

Foster families. Persons who decide to start a foster family usually are married and they often have their own biological children. Multi-child families with, for example, three biological children, have decided to accept more foster children (up to 4), whereas persons without any parental experience decided to take care of one child. These are families of different types: vocational, non-related to the child (multi-child, specialised), non-related adopted, and they take part in the Mentoringprogramm MUNTERwegs. Foster families taking part in the interviews have functioned for 1,5 – 10 years. The parents decided to start foster families for two reasons: because of lack of biological children and an attempt to fill in the void or because of changes in their professional situation and an attempt to fulfil themselves in a new role.

Foster parents emphasised social and health problems of biological parents and initial emotional problems of children placed in foster care as well as their fears whether they would be able to establish lasting relationships with the children. The only exception was a family who decided to adopt the children. These families have gone through formal procedures verifying their readiness to play the role of foster parents as well as professional training courses. What is also of significance to them is the support of people close to them (relatives, friends) and spiritual preparation. They emphasise that it is worth discussing and arranging their current roles and mutual relationships with the biological family. As foster parents stress, they have to be aware of the responsibility that lies with them, they should quickly adapt to

changing circumstances, while an extensive network of support allows them to overcome difficult situations. Foster parents haven't noticed any difficulties related to the assumption of their new roles as foster parents, but they emphasise the advantages of being a foster family, such as: a possibility of supporting children and helping them in a difficult life situation, a possibility of broadening their horizons, social involvement, acquiring knowledge and new experiences, strengthening the support network, empathy towards people who have different experience. Problems related to the starting of a foster family listed included, among others, jealousy among children, lack of time for each child separately or their partners as well as organisational difficulties.

During the first meeting of foster parents with the child, a social worker was present, who helped to build trust-based relationships and gave useful advice (in the case of adoption, the social worker would explain administrative and legal issues). Foster families maintain documentation concerning the child and meet social workers once a week or less frequently, for example once a month, while in the case of any difficulties they maintain frequent telephone and email contacts. Despite the fact the relationships with social workers are assessed as good, foster families expect cooperation in order to achieve the goals of foster care, individualisation of work and flexibility of cooperation rules, and they also emphasise the importance of proper communication and solving difficult situations on an ongoing basis. Further, foster families expect support in relation to regular personal coaching and peer meetings, learning and discussing best practices and getting practical advice in psycho-social issues, practical support (strengthening support network – getting to know professionals for further assistance etc.), good preparation and coaching, introduction into the role of a foster family, how to deal with the biological family, provide a network of other Foster Families, self-help group and financial support.

Biological families. They consist of single persons (mono-parental families, such as a mother and a son) and full families with two parents (these include reconstructed families with a new partner) and children from one or both relationships as well as children included in the family (e.g. a nephew). According to biological

parents, the reasons for placing children in a foster family included: financial problems, stressful living situation, lack of possibility of taking care of the child, the child's behaviour which nearly "ruined whole family life and marriage", the parents' health problems and their addiction to drugs, their immaturity and lack of support. When analysing the development of events in the biological family, the respondents said that in order to prevent the child's placement in a foster family, certain changes should take place, such as the presence of a father and his responsibility for the family, professional support in relation to solving the child's behavioural problems, and also marital therapy and having regular income.

Social workers explain that the role of biological parents in the care of the child is connected with the scope of foster care which can include whole or partial (e.g. several days a week) care of the child. In the case of temporary support of biological parents provided by foster families in relation to the fulfilment of parental duties, it is important to agree on the scope of tasks and rules of cooperation between them. The task of biological parents is then work on the solution of the situation which makes it impossible for the child to stay at home (personal and health problems, related to, for example, addiction, financial problems), support the children in solving their problems (related to education, behaviour, addictions). On the other hand, when a foster family takes full care of the children, the biological family regularly receives information about them, and it is also motivated to maintain close relationships with the children and take part in their lives. Similarly, biological parents expect of their children involvement in the improvement of the situation, if it was caused by the children's behaviour or addiction.

Biological parents believe that their contact with social workers is poor (once a month, usually over the phone, less frequently in person), so they do not experience any problems related to this contact or they expect greater involvement of the representative of social services. They would also like the social worker to understand the perspective and the characteristic of the situation of the biological family whose child has been placed in foster care. Social workers point to the fact that when biological parents lose their child, they can experience strong emotions related to this situation, manifested in: shaking, screaming, crying, swearing, being

overwhelmed with worries about child, also sadness and anger, physical symptoms were upset stomach and low or no appetite, terrible headaches, insomnia and exhaustion, which is why they require help.

The child's return to its family is supported by, for example, a social therapist, a psychotherapist, the foster family, a social worker, although biological families believe that additional help is needed by them, the child and the family as a whole ("we need time to spend together, need to work less, visit therapist together with biological child", "receive some good personal and family coaching, a personal mentor for the biological son", "help from a male person who could build up a close personal relationship with the biological son and the biological family").

Most biological parents believe that their children should not return to their family home yet (one person does not want the child to return at all). However, they take certain steps to get their children back, for example they are supported by a family coach, psycho-therapist as well as social worker to stay cooperative in the support plan, get clean from drugs, sort out social network and find reliable persons / friends, get coaching in educational matters.

Relationships between families. During the child's stay with a foster family, biological families have time to make changes to their lives in order to get the care of their children back. Unfortunately, problems they deal with are often very complex and require strength and persistence to be solved as well as the participation and support of professionals whose knowledge and experience the parents could use.

In view of the information provided by foster parents, there are situations when children placed in foster care can spend most of their time with their biological families, but there are cases when children don't want to go there or the parents don't maintain any contact with their children. Foster families help biological parents maintain contact and build positive relationships with their children. In order to do this, they organise meetings, facilitate communication and support the children's emotional sphere. Contacts with biological families are in most cases initiated by the foster family (about 1-2 times a month and on special days, such as the child's birthday, Christmas). Foster parents provide biological parents with information about

the children, their successes or problems they struggle with. Foster families expect biological families to cooperate and get involved in their children's issues, and social workers often get involved in these relationships in case of difficult situations.

Biological parents claim that they regularly meet foster families (once, twice a week), during holidays, Christmas, on birthdays and in other situations (e.g. at school, at the therapist's office), also when they feel helpless and weak. There are also situations when the contact between the families is limited (meetings once every three months) or there is no contact at all. Biological parents say that they are the ones who initiate contact, while foster families maintain contact only in relation to problematic issues (health, the child's behaviour, school problems, difficult relationships between the children in a foster family), and sometimes the initiative is taken by social workers.

There are often cultural and religious differences between biological and foster families. For example, biological families come from different cultural and religious circles, they form large and close-knit families, they are very religious people who belong to religious communities, or very young people, without any education, who face financial problems and have no support. Biological families perceive foster parents as well-off and educated, but they also mention their ignorance and snobbery.

The tasks of social workers in relation to cooperation with families.

Information gathered during the interviews allows to say that social workers maintain contacts with both foster and biological families; they are also the ones who accompany children when they move to their new home. They try to make it easier for the children to go through this difficult moment in their lives, they build a friendly and safe atmosphere. The first meeting of the child with the foster family depends on the child's age, the type of foster care (long term, short term, full care), but it is also time for introducing and getting to know one another better (interest, hobbies, likes and dislikes), seeing the new house and neighbourhood, discussing the rules governing the new family. The dates of following meetings are also determined (usually twice a month, but in times of crisis, behavioural problems, difficulties with

the foster family, biological family or at school, they meet the child in between). The child and the foster family get the telephone number of the social worker. The task of social workers is to build understanding between all persons involved in the child's situation: the child, the biological and foster families, to help them through difficult times and find themselves in new roles, and to facilitate communication and resolving conflicts.

Social workers maintain constant contacts with foster families and meet them regularly, usually at least once a month. The meetings concern the child's needs (such as support in a new situation) and financial issues, but a social worker also helps in conflict management, moderates the different services that are supporting family (therapist, social care, biological family's social worker, the person responsible for the well fare of the child of community, social workers at school, teachers etc.).

Similarly, the meetings of social workers and biological families are regular (but the frequency is different, depending on the situation: it can be once a week, once a month, but also twice a year). Social workers assess the situation and write reports, also meet in time of crisis. They help manage their child's loss as well as their own and work on the situation to improve circumstances, need to encourage the biological parents to build up relationship with their child. The main goal is reunification of the family and the well-being of the child, work with a support plan and milestones.

Social workers have multiple tasks: collaboration and cooperation must occur between the fields of social work and law as well as with the many levels of government and nongovernmental organizations, the best interest of the child needs to be the priority. Social workers believe that in the work they perform certain skills are particularly useful, and these include: communication skills (non-violent communication), mediatory skills, empathy, acceptance, patience. They make cooperation easier and minimise negative emotions.

Social workers think that their task is to prepare families to work with different specialists, to maintain communication and make them aware of the need to cooperate, develop mutual understanding and respect one another. However, in their

tasks they need additional support of other specialists, exchange of experience, e.g. more support from family therapists coaching the families, regular supervision with a professional supervisor, meetings to organise the case management of each foster child, in-service and non-violent communication skills training.

2.3. Germany

Foster families. The families interviewed accepted at least one child, and three children at the most. Three families have been foster families for over 3 years, one of the families – for 7 years, and one for 12 years. All foster families interviewed are non-related to the child, three of them are vocational families and two are non-vocational. The parents' reasons for becoming foster families are various, and they include: their own biographies – difficult childhood experiences, taking care of younger siblings, the willingness to help a young mother with taking care of her own child, the willingness to have another child, the pleasure to watch a child develop, the fact that their own children have become independent, the fact that a sister plays the role of a foster family. They say that what was useful when they were preparing to the role of foster parents were both professional training courses and courses such as those organised by FCS, seminars for foster parents, the education to a child-minder (day nanny), and previous experience related to the provision of daily care to children, discussions with a sister and biological children. An analysis of the interviews conducted proves that according to foster parents, when their family takes a child, the most important thing is to build a good basis for mutual relationships between the foster family, the child and the biological family. It is important not to protect the children but to help them as long as it is necessary and not to try to convince them that the foster family is better than the biological one. Foster parents also emphasised the need for open communication, as when they decide to fulfil this role, they should know what they can expect. This also concerns biological children who should take active part in the welcoming of new children in a foster family. The parents described their first meetings with children as exciting and electrifying, which is illustrated by the following quote: "Then I saw Sara and, it was, I was electrified, I really had goose bumps. Because it really was the reflection from my daughter's

childhood. I believe that then it was something that is destined. Yeah, and then the glimmer of hope leapt over". They also drew attention to a clearly negative influence of the child's stay in the previous care. Thus, in their interviews they emphasised calm initiation of relationships with the child ("cautious and intensive. Contacts several times per week, accompanied by the stand-in foster mother"). From the perspective of foster parents, the important thing connected with the course of the first meeting with the child was previous, detailed information about the situation they were provided with.

Being a foster parent entails numerous changes in life, such as: limitation of professional life, "turning the family life upside down", the necessity to re-organise the everyday life, gaining new family members and, in consequence, enriching the relationships, e.g. peer relationships in the case of biological children. Thanks to these changes, as foster parents believe, the family grows stronger, there is greater trust and love between biological and foster children. In the opinion of foster parents, these changes also entail certain difficulties, such as: disturbing family relationships and the sense of security related to the fear of the future and whether one will live up to the children's expectations. Another problem is certain tension appearing when one thinks about the necessity/possibility of the child's return to the biological family. Changes also concern the foster child's situation. Foster parents emphasise that the children gain a new family where they feel safe, their lives are more stable and calmer, thanks to which they can deal with their traumas and develop well.

Biological families. Biological families consist of: a mother and her partner, his two sons and their daughter (1 family), a mother and her parents (2), a mother, her partner, her father, the partner's 2 children (2), a father (1). An analysis of the answers of biological parents reveals that children have been placed in foster families for various reasons, such as violence and family conflicts, alcohol abuse, police intervention, the mother's difficulties with ensuring the child's safety, after some difficult experiences the mother needed some time for her own, the biological father's overburdening, lack of adaptation of the mother's life to the children's life, lack of support of social services, the mother's mental disease, lack of care of children

during the parents' professional work, the mother's helplessness. These reasons often co-exist, which is why it is difficult to point to one prevailing cause. According to the biological parents, the children wouldn't have been placed in a foster family, had their mothers been more responsible, had they thought what kind of man their ex-partners were, had the help of the services been greater and quicker. Based on the answers of biological parents it can be said that they are aware of the influence of the difficult situations experienced in the family on their children. They clearly emphasise that changes "destroyed" the children (they sleep badly, they have bad dreams, they have tantrums, they reveal difficult behaviour) and their future, as bad events can't be forgotten. They also acknowledge the positive effect of the children's stay with a foster family, where the children develop well, have good school results, they are intelligent and full of life.

The biological parents interviewed appreciate the possibility of meeting their children, but they also point to hindrances to their contact with children, such as: distance and the work performed, short meetings, routine and numerous responsibilities during meetings with the children, the sense of alienation in relationships caused by the child's distrust of the biological family (the children avoid contact, they are closed, they don't want their mother to hug them), changes in the child ("I don't know who she is anymore").

Relationships between families. The answers of foster and biological parents show that their mutual relationships are very diverse. Foster parents point to both regular (every two weeks) and irregular, brief meetings or only telephone contacts with biological parents. At the same time they say they appreciate the efforts and involvement of biological parents and they are willing to accept their help. They emphasise that they try to support biological families, build mutual trust through discussions and providing them with information about the child's development or interests. They say their relationships with biological families are positive, they feel respected but they also notice difficulties with maintaining these relationships, which results from forgetfulness, instability, aggression and improper behaviour of the

biological parents towards their children (e.g. punishments, rejection, ignoring or hurting the child).

Biological parents assess their relationships with foster parents as positive. They declare that they are aware of the fact that foster parents take care of their children and provide them with good conditions. In their answers the biological parents clearly emphasise good communication with foster parents in relation to the most important issues, events, health and emotions. They know they can always count on the foster parents' help. This is illustrated by the answer of one of the biological mothers: "Ms. A. is like a second mom to me. I know I can always go to her and talk to her. It's also important for her to know when I have problems so that she knows why I'm, for example, acting strange during a visitation. When Amelie comes back, I definitely want to stay in contact. It's important to me, and if we weren't it would be like something was missing from my life".

Only one of the biological parents researched signals distrust of the foster family and assesses their behaviour and care of the child as inadequate. An analysis of the answers of biological parents shows that they expect foster families to be understanding, respectful and sensitive to the child's needs, and that they will offer the child the life the biological family is unable to ensure.

Biological parents point to cultural and social differences between them and the foster parents, such as: the organisation of family/everyday life (e.g. the time of meals, going to bed), nationality, rituals and traditions. At the same time they believe that these differences have no influence on their mutual relationships. On the other hand, foster parents mentioned financial differences and differences related to the place of residence (different neighbourhood).

The answers of the social workers interviewed suggest that the cooperation between foster and biological parents is not easy. They list such problems as: different interests and different ideas of the child's good, the biological parents' jealousy and distrust, rivalry for the child, mutual misunderstanding, the fact that the child idealises the biological parents and that foster parents are over-dedicated.

The tasks of social workers in relation to cooperation with families.

Social workers describe their relationships with foster families as successful. They declare mutual cooperation and trust. In most cases they contact foster families through phone calls, house visits, help planings as well as during official meetings – help plan visitations. This cooperation is most intense at the beginning of the child's stay with the foster family when they analyse the children's development and they explain to the foster family what happens to them. Then their meetings concern mostly issues related to plan-making, attempts to reach agreement, the child's health and return to the biological family. Social workers also formulate their expectations of foster families, so that they make it possible for the children to maintain relationships with their biological families and cultural background. In the opinion of social workers, one of the greatest difficulties is related to the fact that foster parents establish very close relationships with the children, they sacrifice for them and give them unconditional love, which is why the child's return to the biological family is sometimes painful.

The German social workers describe their contacts with biological families as minimum. One of the workers said that the contact with biological families is good (meetings, phone calls related to consultations). The most frequent reasons for lack of contact include addictions and psychological instability, which makes it really difficult to obtain consent to treat the child. They also point to other difficulties in relationships with biological families, such as ambivalence consisting in making empty promises, defending one's own position and creating one's own reality, contradicting oneself, lies.

Social workers believe that the characteristics and skills most useful when working with foster and biological families include: clear communication, honesty, openness, courage, the ability to listen, neutrality, sensitivity, empathy, integrity, the ability to recognise both sides, the ability to help others, the ability to focus on the child's good, mediatory skills, the ability to work with and not against one another.

Biological families interviewed assess their contacts with social workers negatively. As the interviews indicate, they are not satisfied with and they apply for a

change of the social worker assigned, and they also suggest that the meetings should be substituted with phone calls.

Foster parents describe their relationships with social workers in an ambiguous way. There are answers suggesting that social workers are helpful, reliable and that they supplement foster care, but some respondents said that their visits are unnecessary and stressful.

2.4. Croatia

Foster families. All foster families belong to non-related traditional foster care. The average number of foster family members is six (at least four members, up to maximum of seven members). One foster family provide home for an average of three children (at least one, up to maximum of four children). The reasons for becoming foster parent are mainly humanitarian nature, love for children, a desire to help and protect children as well as financial and material reasons. Foster parents are by themselves psychologically prepared for the role, they have used forms of professional assistance provided by the Centre for social welfare, training, counselling and interviews with social workers as well as information exchange with other foster parents. They consider that the preparations are not sufficient. During the period of adaptation to foster family, they think that Social Welfare Centre should provide all the information about the child, his past experiences and habits. As positive consequences of fostering a child, foster parents report more enjoyment with children and feeling of doing something good for others. Negative consequences are the lack of time for themselves and their families because they are totally dedicated to children and their upbringing.

Children generally talk positively about their foster parents. Younger children are on average happier, while teenagers often complain, especially about the amount of pocket money. There are some changes in the lives of foster children. Their primary needs are satisfied, they are better socialized and more satisfied, they have better school performance and are more disciplined. There are no significant changes in the lives of the biological family.

The goals foster parents report that they managed to satisfy primary needs of children, their better socialization, developed work habits and hygiene.

Foster parents do not use professional help and they find that they do not need it. One foster parent stated that he uses professional help in the form of consultation by the Social Welfare Centre.

All foster parents report that among institutions that provide professional help the most useful is the one from Social Welfare Centres. One foster parent stated that he gets support from the educational institutions and non-governmental organizations.

Expectations of foster parents concerning the challenges of foster care are: support from the government and more support in the form of sanctioning unannounced arrivals of biological parents, their delays in agreement and inappropriate behaviours.

The largest number of foster parents think that they are the one that have the largest impact on child's return to the biological family.

Biological families. The average number of members of the biological family is four (at least one member, up to six members).

The circumstances that lead to taking away children from their families and placing them in foster families are different (mental and physical illness of parents, domestic violence, poverty, alcoholism, addiction).

Some parents think that it was the only possible solution, while others see the solution by improving financial status.

The children were, on average, in contact with their biological parents as often as legal practise approves. They talk mostly about their everyday activities.

Younger children, on average, have higher expectations of their biological parents (that they will change, they'll be back home...).

Difficulties that foster parents face in relation to children are mainly inappropriate behaviour, undeveloped hygiene habits, behaviour disorders, rejecting limits, undeveloped work habits.

Parents knowledge about their child achievements and problems depends on information that their child or foster parent is ready to share with them. On average, they have a very little information about the achievements and problems of their child.

Biological parents report that they are in a regularly contacts with their child. They talk mostly about everyday things, school commitments and socializing with other children.

They care for their children in a way to have regular contacts with them.

Biological parents are using just assistance form Social Welfare Centres. They cannot rely on some form of non-formal help and emphasise that social workers and medical staff are of the most help in returning child to their family.

All biological parents want their children to be returned to their family. They find that the only condition that must be satisfied is the better financial status, they see financial assistance as the most important in bringing child back to their family. None of those that were interviewed have an idea what to do to get the child back to their family.

Relationships between families. Younger children mostly ask for their biological parents and want to see them and return to them, while older children are more conscious of the situation and they do not idealize their parents.

Foster parents mostly talk with children about their biological parents as much as children express their need for that and in a manner which is appropriate to their age.

Contacts of foster parents and biological parents on average are good. They contact each other as often as it is legally defined. Contacts were initiated equally often by both sides.

Foster parents don't have high expectations of the biological parents, they think that biological parents have insufficient insight into their behaviour and do not want to change.

Socio-cultural differences refer to differences in socioeconomic status, religious differences and educational styles and methods.

Biological parents estimate that contacts with the foster parents are good and initiated equally by both groups. Their expectations of foster parents are to care for their children and to provide them a good life.

The difficulties encountered in relation to the foster parents are generally misunderstandings, prohibiting contacts with the child and defamation in front of the children.

The tasks of social workers in relation to cooperation with families.

Foster parents see the role of social workers as supportive (conversation and counselling). They also see their role in impact that they can have on biological parents. They have a very good relationship with the social workers and expect constant support from them.

Biological parents report that they have a good relationship with the social workers. Contacts are initiated mainly by the social workers. They mostly talk about their rights and obligations. Social workers help them with advice when problems occur.

Social workers see their role as mediators in the process – they make it easier to get to know the child and the foster parents. The skills most useful and essential in working with foster parents and biological parents are communication skills, active listening, counselling skills and active listening.

There are many factors that must be met in order to provide adequate cooperation (economic conditions, good preparation and support).

Social workers evaluate cooperation with foster parents as very good but with possibility of improvement, while cooperation with the biological parents is worse. Social workers generally believe that foster parents and biological parents need a lot of support and advice.

Social workers expect foster parents to provide appropriate care to foster children and help them to adapt to the new situation. Contacts are usually initiated by both sides depending on their needs. Commonly their contacts are realized during regular field visits and renewal of foster parents licence as well as when there is a need for conversation between social worker and foster child. In order to improve

cooperation with the foster parents they are trying to raise awareness of their foster role and to discuss about mutual expectations.

Their relationship with biological parents is not as good as with foster parents. They expect that biological parents accept foster family and gain insights into their own behaviour.

Social workers evaluate their relationship with foster children as good. The contact depends on the needs and is initiated mainly by the foster parents or social workers. Usually they talk about the problems of adaptation and difficulties in school. Expectations of foster children is to have open and honest communication.

Effects of their work they evaluate as good, but they say it could be much better - the main reason is lack of time and work overload.

Social workers are not satisfied with the support they receive. It's mostly support from their colleagues. All social workers expected professional supervision in dealing with difficult families. Moreover they would like to have support from the non-governmental organizations.

2.5. Italy

Foster families. Four of the families researched adopted one child each, and two of the families – two children each. One of the families has functioned for about 10 years, and the others for 4-5 years. Italian families are: related (1 family), vocational, not related to the child, multi-child (1), part-time care (3). According to foster parents, the circumstances of starting a foster family were the following: love for children, the willingness to help the child in difficult times, opening one's own family for someone in need, opening one's own children for others, previous voluntary activity. Elements that helped them to prepare to run a foster family included: a course at the Foster Family Centre, meetings with a group of other foster families, seminars and conferences, training courses (e.g. in managing emotions). The decision to accept a child was also related to attempts to prepare biological children and one's own parents and siblings. There was a situation that "other members of our family didn't approve of the decision and didn't support us". The

conditions that have to be met when children become foster family members include the care of the children's health, their psychophysical wellbeing as well as a clear project of foster care, the awareness that the child is in the centre of the project and that the child's good is of the greatest importance, clear and feasible goals, empathy, acceptance, understanding. Foster parents described their first meetings with children as "mutual feelings from the very beginning", great curiosity, strong emotions, fear that the children "won't accept us". Social workers provided the parents with detailed information about the children and their families, support for the child and help related to mutual communication. So far, running foster families have brought them love, enriched them, re-organised their lives, ensured their activity, allowed them to learn relationships with a child other than a biological one, allowed their children to meet new friends and made them lead a more conscious life. It has been possible to achieve the following goals: sustaining the same enthusiasm as at the beginning, greater attention to the child's needs, love, support for children and shaping the child's respect for foster parents through it, building a positive vision of life, accompanying the child in the return to the biological family, and special experience for biological children. The foster children have found a stable family, they are safe and calm, "they finally behave like children". According to one of the foster parents, the child had to deal with the love for biological and foster parents.

The child has a possibility of returning to its biological families, and so foster parents help the biological mother become more attentive to the child, more self-reliant and able to combine work and care of the child. On the other hand, the children in foster families learn new customs, new behaviour, other than in their biological families. Foster parents claim that a different nationality of the children (Moroccan origin) is not a problem; if the children were born in Italy, they have got used to the culture of this country. According to the parents, culture has greater influence on the relationships with the children's biological families.

Biological families. Families consisting of a mother and children (3) or only a mother (2). The reasons for the children's stay in foster families is lack of family, someone who could help, problems with reconciling work and taking care of the child,

bad relationships with a partner, single parenthood. Three of the mothers stated that no changes in the family's past would have protected the child against placement in foster care, "I'm the sole breadwinner in the family, I have to work". It would be easier, if the mothers had some relatives in Italy, if they got jobs and support of social services. An analysis of their answers indicates that the mothers notice beneficial effects of the children's stay with foster families, as their emotional relationships are better, "I can better satisfy the child's needs", the children are more trustful, they express their emotions better and accept school.

In 3 Italian biological families, the children live with their biological mothers (a part-time project) and spend weekends with their foster families (different arrangements are possible, such as weekends with biological families). As one of the mothers emphasises, "the child is now with me, we're developing emotional stability in our relationships". Differences between families, such as religion, financial situation, family size or nationality, are not problems. According to the mothers, the children now are better taken care of, their school situation is better and they are more emotionally open. A part-time project makes it possible for mothers to live with their children, to fulfil the tasks of the project, to receive information about the children, to maintain relationships with the foster families and to become more responsible. One of the mothers who does not live with her child wants the child to return and tries to improve her living conditions.

Relationships between families. An analysis of answers of foster and biological parents shows that they meet regularly during test meetings. Both categories of parents point to this form of meetings. They also meet when they take children to each other in the case of part-time foster care. According to the foster parents, the frequency of meetings is the following: daily, several times a week, once every three weeks, whereas biological parents mentioned: 2-3 times a week or "we don't communicate too often".

The parents assess their mutual relationships positively and they don't mention any difficulties. Foster parents emphasise that the aim of their activity is also to support mothers by solving problems identified in the foster care project

developed, and to help them regain their parents skills. It can be assumed that children are the people who connect parents the most, “the child lives with its mother and expects support of her and the foster family”. The parents talk about the children, potential problems and the project. Biological parents’ expectations of foster families are related to the care of children, supporting the child in building trust and emotional relationships. Several of the parents interviewed stated that they didn’t want to change anything in these relationships (3).

The tasks of social workers in relation to cooperation with families.

Social workers contact foster families by visiting them, by meetings, by emails and over the telephone in order to check whether the foster care project is followed, to assess progress and identify problems. They are interested in the foster parents’ adequate care of the child, their participation in events offered by the foster centre, a change in the way they think about biological parents, and their involvement in cooperation with the social worker. Social workers who took part in the interviews shared some comments about the foster parents’ mistrust of the workers, the fact that they don’t appreciate the child’s care project and that they belittle the child’s problems. Their assessment of relationships with the parents depends on the situation of each of the families, current issues, questions and the project implementation. They say they contact the families 1-2 a month, once every three months, also depending on the project implementation stage.

Social workers meet biological families more often – several times a month or once a month during test meetings, and they contact field workers who maintain relationships with the families. The subject of discussions is an analysis of the foster care project implementation, the goals set, the relationships of the biological parents, the children and the foster families, undertaking parental tasks in relation to the children and spending time with them.

Biological parents assess their relationships with social workers as good (4) or poor (1). Foster parents assess them very well; they emphasise that they receive support when they need it, and that the project implementation is monitored. Test

meetings are once again mentioned as opportunities to talk, make arrangements and commitments.

According to social workers, skills that are most useful in their work include: readiness, willingness to help, clarity of activity, the ability to manage a small group, and flexibility.

2.6. Poland

Foster families. In Poland, the following categories of foster families can be distinguished: vocational and non-vocational (related and non-related).

The foster families interviewed consist of foster parents (in the case of non-vocational families these are grandparents or, less frequently, aunts and uncles), sometimes the foster parents' own (biological) underage children and foster children. Their financial situations vary, according to the foster families there are times when the situation is bad, but sometimes it is very good. Foster parents are people aged 30-73. Persons more advanced in years are vocational related parents. Foster families include both single and married persons.

In most cases, Polish foster families accept one or two children, but there are also situations when these are 4 children (if they are siblings). The age of foster children placed in the families interviewed is diverse, from 6 to adulthood. After the children become independent and even after they start their own families, they still maintain contact with foster families. The respondents have been foster parents for between a year and over ten years.

The reasons for becoming foster parents differ, depending on the family. In the case of vocational families, these reasons are related to pro-social attitudes, willingness to act for others and help them ("we've been thinking about it for a long time", an example of friends who are a foster family, previous contacts with the child outside the family), and the inability to have another child. In the case of non-vocational families, the reasons are related to the sense of responsibility towards a grandson, a member of extended family, in relation to whom the biological parents

did not fulfil their parental duties (early parenthood of the biological parents, their addiction). Related parents (grandparents) undertake their roles without any specialist training, they rarely attend any courses, including the specialist ones. On the other hand, non-related families attend specialist training courses, take part in meetings, workshops and support groups. They also talk to other foster families and friends, and such informal discussions are what they value the most (“such an exchange of experiences is most useful”). In most cases they have some experience as parents. The respondents assess their preparation to become a foster parent differently, their opinions are often extreme – some of them say that they were prepared, others state that they were not prepared at all.

The first meetings with the children the foster parents had not known before took place in foster facilities (such as a children’s home) in the presence of the facility’s employees. According to one of the mothers, “it was just scouting”. Then, as a different foster mother said, “we were meeting her in the children’s home for four months before she got used to us”.

When talking about things that have changed in their lives after they became foster families, foster parents point to certain difficulties, i.e. greater responsibility, fast pace of life, tiredness, more duties and activities, behaviour problems in the family, also related to their biological children (a change in the biological children’s behaviour – jealousy, copying the behaviour of foster children, rivalry for the parents’ attention). They also notice positive aspects of being foster parents, such as “growing younger” thanks to returning to parental roles, a change in daily routines (a necessity to organise the time better).

The parents claim that the form of care they provide the children with mostly ensures the satisfaction of the basic needs, such as the sense of security, peace, love, the sense of belonging as well as material situation, and providing the biological family with reliable information about the children. According to foster parents, there are social differences as well as differences related to living and housing conditions between biological and foster families in terms of raising children (different priorities), and there are also religious differences but foster parents don’t treat them as problems. The children can practice the religion they were brought up in in their

biological families. In the case of cultural differences, social workers emphasise the problems of the Romani children with meeting the requirements of public schools but they also say that “the Romani are good foster parents”.

Foster families use different kinds of support, both related to institutions (such as social welfare centres, a psychological and pedagogical counselling centre) and specialists, i.e. psychologists, pedagogues, a coordinator of the kinship placement, including volunteers and church support organisations as well as informal support within a family (husband, children, sister-in-law, sister, parents, mother, father). They most value the support of people prepared to undertake professional activity, who have competence in a specific field (such as a lawyer, a psychologist, a pedagogue).

Foster parents contact the workers of social services, as needed. In most cases they talk about difficult everyday issues of the family, the organisation of the child’s free time (cinema, theatre, picnics, competitions), the child’s health, using medical (specialist) support, a possibility of institutionalised family support, including financial support (summer camp subsidies), and they also often talk about behaviour issues. They boast about the child’s successes (first places in competitions, the fact that the child was promoted to the next year of school) and inform about events that are important for the family.

Foster parents describe their relationships with the children as good (“strong, like in a family”, “like with our own children”). However, they also point to certain factors making these relationships harder, such as the child’s loyalty to biological parents, mental illness and improper behaviour. Some children are aggressive towards foster parents and social workers, and others quite the contrary – they are withdrawn. Children also reveal serious emotional problems, perhaps because of too many difficult experiences (“the child has been in too many facilities”). When the related families don’t know how to deal with problems, they frighten the children with social workers (“or the lady will take you to the children’s home”).

Among the aims that have been achieved, the foster parents list: the creation of a family, the stabilising of the child’s family life, close relationships with the child and personal fulfilment as a foster parent. They also emphasise that the benefits of

the child's staying with a foster family include having a new family, getting to know and learning how to respect rules (the children learn work, responsibility), improving the child's health, regulating the child's daily rhythm, increasing the sense of security, improving the school results (catching up), getting to know new dishes, tastes ("they eat other things, not only apples").

According to social workers, foster families should be dissolved when there are cases of psychological abuse, when a parent is diagnosed with a mental disease, when children are neglected, when foster parents abuse alcohol or don't want to cooperate in the case of difficulties, when the foster parent's health condition is poor, when the family no longer fulfils its educational and care functions towards the child and doesn't receive adequate support.

Biological families. Some of the biological families are single-parent families. They consist of persons in partner or marital relationships, who have at least one child placed in a foster family.

Biological parents believe that their children have been placed in foster families because of their lack of job, difficult living conditions, bad financial situation, addictions, emotional problems and difficulties fulfilling parental roles. They are aware of the fact that for the child to return they would have to introduce changes to their lives in relation to the way they fulfil their parental roles and to improve their living conditions, undergo addiction treatment or stay sober, and find a job. Biological parents believe that the differences between them and foster families concern living conditions, parental skills, and the experience related to bringing up children. They say that the people who help them the most with getting their children back are employees of the social welfare centres, family assistants, psychologists as well as foster parents, court-appointed guardians, and their family (mother). Biological parents state that they use the help of institutions (social welfare centres, non-governmental organisations, children's homes) and specialists (psychologists, therapists). Some of them emphasise that they can count on informal help of their relatives (mother, the mother's partner), foster family and neighbours. However, there are also biological families who declare they receive no help at all.

Those parents who have contact with social workers assess it as good or very good. In most cases this is contact over the telephone and/or in person, initiated as needed by the worker or the parents. As an analysis of the answers indicates, in most cases it is initiated by a mother who wants to get her child back. The subjects of the meetings are usually official issues (debts, benefits, allowances), finding a job, lack of income (the willingness to set up one's own business activity) and contacts with the children. Biological parents have contact with social employees also when they live together with the foster family (which should not take place but there are such cases among related foster families).

Relationships between families. The relationships between foster families, children and biological families vary, some of them are frequent and good, some are infrequent but regular (for example, when a biological parent is in prison). According to foster parents, their contacts with biological parents are rare. They often have no information where the biological parents are, they can't contact them, which makes the care of the children very difficult, particularly in the case of illness or hospital stay when the biological parents' written consent is required to treat the child. There are situations when biological parents want to get their children back and then they initiate contact with the foster family and the children. However, in most cases relationships with biological parents are initiated by foster parents and they particularly concern formal issues related to the child's situation (such as obtaining consent for medical treatment or going on holiday abroad). During the meetings of the parents, a social worker from the social welfare centre can be present in order to make mutual relationships easier.

The answers of foster parents indicate that the children's stay at their homes has changed nothing in the situation and the behaviour of biological parents who still drink alcohol, don't take care of their children, don't maintain any contact with them and lie. Foster parents believe that the children's stay with a foster family has made the lives of biological parents easier, as they no longer have any responsibilities. Difficulties in relationships with biological parents, according to foster parents, are connected with quarrels, fights, lies during meetings, avoiding contacts with the

children, shifting the responsibility for the child's care and upbringing onto the foster family, lack of the biological parents' initiative to get their children back, inciting the children to rebel against the foster parents (treating foster parents as enemies), and using foster parents (in financial terms). Moreover, the relationships between families are sometimes made more difficult because of a mental disorder or disability of the biological parent.

Foster parents talk to children about their families, as needed. Children sometimes start talking about their biological parents themselves. Vocational parents speak well of the children's biological parents and they want to cooperate with them, so that the children can return to their biological families. On the other hand, related parents don't always speak well of the children's biological parents. In some cases they forbid or prevent contact with biological parents, even though the children want to return to them because they feel emotionally attached to them, particularly when the children are young.

The children's return to their biological families is most often supported by social workers, family assistants, coordinators of the kinship placement, guardians and employees of the children's home.

There are relationships between families when the biological parents meet their children. According to the answers of the respondents, there are few meetings (rarely, three times a year, during Christmas), the contacts are occasional but personal. The children very often have no contact with their parents because the relations have been severed. There are also cases of indirect, telephone contacts (even several times a day). It is initiated by both categories of families and the children. However, there are situations when the biological parents want their full parental rights to be returned and then they contact their children rather regularly and frequently, several times a week, once a week (at weekends) or once every two weeks. Foster parents say that the children miss their biological parents and idealise them, but sometimes they are also ashamed of them and avoid contact (they feel aversion to them), and their sense of emotional safety is unstable.

In their answers, biological parents assessed their relationships with foster parents differently. Sometimes they spoke very well (they were grateful for their help

and care of their children) or well of them (good, satisfying relationships). If meetings take place, they are initiated by both biological and foster parents. During these meetings they talk about the children's issues, meetings with them, their school or kindergarten results, their behaviour, visits to the doctor and financial issues.

Biological parents perceive social workers as people who supervise the relationships and control the situation.

Biological parents declare that they spend free time with their children in an active way (walks, riding a bike), they play with their children at home, visit a play hall or their relatives. They believe that their relationships with the children are difficult because of the children's behaviour who sometimes cry, rebel and don't know how to play. Some of the biological parents claim that they know everything about their children's situation and know about their successes, i.e. good school results, speech defect correction, health improvement, acquiring new skills (increasing the child's independence, learning new poems, songs, letters). Others quite the contrary – complain about lack of the latest information about their children.

Biological parents want their children to return to them, although some of them say that it is impossible at the moment. The barrier is lack of income and inadequate living conditions or situation (a partner in prison, addiction). In order to make it possible for the children to return home, the parents maintain contacts with them, appear in court, look for a job, organise formal issues and take care of their health. They maintain they take part in care of the children placed in foster families by playing with them, providing help (material, financial, educational) in taking care of them, making certain decisions, and being present in difficult situations (for example, when the child is at the hospital). They also take part in events important for the child (such as birthdays).

The tasks of social workers in relation to cooperation with families.

Social workers contact non-vocational families once every two months and once a month in the case of vocational families. If there is a situation which is difficult for the child and the family, the social worker contacts them more often. It is different in the case of a family assistant who only works with the child's biological family in order to

eliminate harmful elements of the child's living environment and to prevent the child's placement in foster care (a family or an institution), or to make it possible for the child to return to its biological family. The assistant's contact with the family is regular, at least once a week or more frequently, and in crisis situations they meet even four times a week, but during the last 6 months of work with the family the number of meetings drops to one visit every two weeks.

Social workers emphasise that their role consists mostly in accompanying biological families. They provide social support: emotional, evaluative and instrumental (particularly in relation to giving advice how to solve individual difficult situations, how to write an application, where to go to send a child placed in a foster family for a summer camp or enrol the child on a dancing course, what to do to have full parental rights over the child placed in a foster family returned).

Social workers emphasise that they are advisors and sometimes mediators; at times, they are just present during meetings between family members (usually at the request of one of the parties: the child or the foster parent). They help non-vocational families in resolving difficult situations (concerning, among others, the organisation of teenagers' free time, giving them more freedom to choose their friends and come back home after 8 pm, or determining the rules binding in the family, particularly when the family are grandparents).

Social workers also emphasise that they undertake diagnostic activities. Their task is to identify the family's needs and help to satisfy them. They inspire numerous activities but they don't take direct part in solving the family's problems "because the family have to solve their problems on their own". Sometimes, as they stress, they are "liaisons", "mediators" between the family and specialists in different fields, e.g. psychologists, social workers or support institutions, such as specialist, family or psychological and educational centres, units working with addicts, cultural and educational facilities. According to foster and biological families, social workers fulfil supervisory functions.

2.7. Romania

Foster families. The families interviewed are vocational families, multi-child foster parenting, which have functioned for 11-16 years. Two of the families have accepted 4 children, and three – 2 children. In some of the families, there are also adoptable children and biological children. The circumstances of starting foster families include: vocation, taking a child from an institution and bringing the child up without any formalities, many-year interest in working with children, lack of children and a husband, dramatic events in the family (illness, death), the fact that biological children left the home and the family's bad financial situation. When preparing for their new roles, foster parents used professional training courses, experience related to raising their own children and professional education (e.g. a nurse), the help of a daughter (a social worker), support of family and sometimes neighbours. Foster families think professional preparation is important because it is needed and you can meet other foster parents to share experience with. On the other hand, the obligation to renew a foster family certificate is “an unnecessary nuisance, what is needed is knowledge of specific problems and not repeating previous subjects”.

The procedure of accepting children in foster families is related to a phone call from a social worker several days before the children come, and then the social worker brings the children. Foster parents draw attention to the fact that they were given certain information about the children on the phone, they did not know much about the children, and they were given the rest of the information only after they accepted the children. One of the families stated that they were presented with a *fait accompli*. The parents remember that what accompanied their first meetings with the children were the feeling of anxiety, preparation, festivity and the desire to provide the children with necessary care. The parents believe that it is important for a foster child to receive attention and love, to observe the child's needs and the ability to understand them, to have knowledge of the child's medical history (the issue of medicines taken), and a belief that “the child creates a programme” of support, as it is impossible to foresee everything or to make any plans. The answers analysed also include comments concerning the today's perspective (after a number of years as a

foster family): some distance from the foster children is needed, a balance between distance and love.

It seems that the fact of having a foster family gives the parents a lot of strength, they say they have more good memories, their life is fulfilled, the children have filled in the void in their lives, now everything is complete, and a mother “has forgotten about her age”. The children are important, their “better childhood is better youth”, what matters is the sense of responsibility for their support. At the moment, the parents point to the following difficulties in their relationships with children: lack of respect for foster parents, behaviour issues, discipline problems and typical teenagers’ problems. According to the parents, the aims it has been possible to achieve in foster families have been focused on the children. In all families researched, the parents are proud of the children and they believe that they have brought up strong personalities, the children are educated and accepted by the society, they look like other children and they achieve successes in their lives, “they develop beautifully”, and they have good memories of their foster families.

Biological families. In four of the biological families interviewed, one of the children has been placed in a foster family, and in one of the families – two children. Biological families are broken families, most often consisting of a mother and her current friend, sometimes already not present in the family life. Three of the families have several children (8 or 4). One of the biological families was represented in the research by the father. According to the parents, the reasons for placing their children in foster families include: lack of material, financial resources to bring up children, the children’s health problems (such as coeliac disease), the mother could not breast-feed the child, the child was not accepted by the mother’s parents, the mother left the child (the mother accused the father of alcoholism and aggression), the death of a grandmother and taking care of an ill father. The parents’ answers in relation to the past were as follows: had the mother not left, had the partner helped more, had the grandmother not died, had they had a job, living and financial conditions, had there been no tension in the family relationships.

All the parents interviewed want their children to return to the family. Thus, based on an analysis of their answers it can be said that they undertake such

activities as maintaining relationships with their children, visiting them, acquiring information about their children, and following the social worker's orders. Two of the parents gave no answers. A comment of the person interviewing the respondents revealed that most of the biological parents live in the Romani community and they visit their children 1-2 times a year, and that they have no sufficient financial resources to raise their children. An analysis of the answers of foster parents indicates that the situation of each child is different – some of them have no contact with their biological parents, in the case of others the contacts are irregular or the children have been visited by their parents only once, but there are also cases when there are 2-3 visits a month, or even more.

Relationships between the families. The relationships between foster families, children and biological families are different in each of the foster families. The meetings take place in the foster family's house or at the office. They are initiated by foster parents, biological parents or the social worker. Foster parents assess these relationships positively or negatively. The assessment is positive when the biological parents visit their children and don't disturb their safety, when they can talk about the children's issues, their education, future, progress, everyday situations, and when reintegration is possible, when the parents are able to assume the cooperative attitude. One of the foster mothers emphasises that she accepts biological parents as they are. On the other hand, the assessment is negative when the parents disturb meetings with the children with their aggressive behaviour or alcohol abuse, when they are unable or unwilling to talk to their children, when they disrespect or are hostile towards the foster parents, when they make empty promises to the children, when the children don't want to meet them and are nervous about these meetings. A small child adapted to the foster family only after the biological father (who was aggressive and ironic) stopped visiting it. One of the foster parents criticised the rights of biological parents. He doesn't protest against their visiting rights (he would like to limit their right to make decisions about children placed in foster families) but against their behaviour which complicates the relationships and the fact that they don't improve their skills related to raising children – they say they

will take the children back after they have spent 11 years in a foster family or when they are 18.

Sometimes foster parents point to the fact that it is difficult to give the children back to their biological families, and so it is important for them to develop the ability to let the children go. One of the foster mothers is “happy when she sees the child’s reintegration”. The children’s reintegration into their families is a difficult issue. A biological mother said that her son would have better conditions in the foster family than in the biological one. The child doesn’t want to leave the living conditions of the foster family and live in the conditions offered by the biological family. According to one of the foster parents, the child and its biological parents differ, e.g. the child is meticulous about hygiene, and their biological parents aren’t. A foster mother worries about the children but offers them extensive support. Foster parents express their doubts whether the biological parents understand the need for changes (hygiene issues, provision of food, care of education, improving their parental skills), so that the reintegration of the child into the family is possible. One of the foster parents resolves the dilemma about what is more important – kinship or help in a foster family, saying that foster care is better.

An analysis of the biological parents’ answers reveals their assessment of their relationships with foster parents. For example, the parents point to “a bad beginning” of the relationships which are rather hard. They emphasise their belief that foster parents raise their children well and love them. One of the fathers is critical of the difficulties he introduces in the relationships with the child (verbal aggression and a resolution “to be better to the child”). The father asks for meetings, the social worker supports him, explains everything and provides legal information (for example, about the child’s return). As one of the mothers emphasised, she doesn’t know the foster family because the social worker denied her meetings with the child. Biological parents expect foster parents to raise their children well. They declare that they meet foster parents: every second day, once a week, once every 3 months, and only one meeting.

The tasks of social workers in relation to cooperation with families.

Social workers can help the families shape their mutual relationships. One of them said that visiting the biological family is a greater priority than visiting the foster family. Meetings with foster families take place every month, every three months, twice a year, and more frequently in crisis situations – even every day. Social workers don't stick to any specific dates of meetings, they prefer personal contacts at the office or at the foster family's house, and telephone contacts. The subjects of discussions include the children's education, their problems, relationships with the children's parents, documentation, adoption-related issues, making the parents more sensitive to the problems of the biological family. The social workers' expectations of foster parents are mostly related to the child, as they point to the need for greater honesty and openness of the parents to the children's problems, greater attention to their behaviour, talking to the children also about their biological families. Social workers emphasise the most basic values in their relationships with parents – honesty, openness, trust.

An analysis of the social workers' answers shows that they rarely contact biological families, they meet at the office or in the Romani community (e.g. twice a year) because it is difficult to meet them, "they move from place to place". These meetings take place more frequently when the biological parents ask about the family's reintegration. Social workers aim to make the relationships between the parents and the children easier, to be present when they talk, to bolster the parents' courage, to help overcome prejudices against the Romani, to organise meetings with the foster family (which is not always willing to meet the child's Romani parents). Social workers indicate that sometimes it is all about the biological parents' responsible decision – to maintain relationships with the children or to give them a chance for adoption. Social workers also provide information about the foster family, "they praise the work of foster parents in front of the biological ones", but most often they point to the necessity of the biological parents' willingness to establish cooperation.

Biological parents talk about positive and negative relationships with social workers. They are positive when the social workers "do not look down on the

Romani”, they are active in relationships with the family, they always provide help and information about the children or their return to the family. Negative assessment is related to situations when social workers are contemptuous, do not provide information and “don’t care”. Sometimes the mother doesn’t know the social worker who takes care of her child.

Foster parents can meet social workers every month during the so-called bill’s day, or more frequently, when the child is ill or there are other problems, or when the child comes to a family or leaves it. Foster parents describe these relationships as formal – when they are connected with formal issues, or true – when they trust the social worker, they are satisfied with the cooperation and the workers perform their duties with due diligence.

Social workers listed the following skills that help them shape their relationships with others: communication skills, open-mindedness, empathy, experience, knowledge of the psychotherapeutic methods, patience, faith, trust, sense of humour. They also say they would like to organise more meetings of biological parents, foster parents, children and social workers.

Summary

Analysis of information collected in Romanian foster families allows for characterizing the features of multiple-children families accepting Romani children. In such families there are also children that could be adopted and children brought to the family when they were babies and staying there until adulthood. Analysis of information collected in Italian foster families presents the problem of temporary stay of a child in foster environment and its return to its biological family. Out of five Italian biological families three had 4 children returned to their mothers, and in one family the child is in the process of returning. The return of a child to his/her biological mother seen as a process is an inspiration for further project activities. The analysis of information collected in German foster families, on the other hand, showed stages of adapting a child to his/her foster environment and supporting the biological parents

by foster parents. Analysis of the relations between families in Poland revealed the demanding attitudes of biological parents.

Austrian parents and social workers' answers show difficulties the biological parents face with being present in the life of their child. Most of biological parents do not undertake any activity in order to get their child back. Information provided by the Swiss participants, on the other hand, turns our attention to the fact pointed out to by social workers, that biological parents at the moment of losing their child may react violently to the situation, which demonstrates itself in: shaking, screaming, crying, and swearing. They are overwhelmed with worries about their child, also feel sadness and anger, physical symptoms such as: upset stomach and low or no appetite, terrible headaches, insomnia and exhaustion, and therefore they require help. In Croatian foster parents' answers one can see that the problem is that foster parents don't have high expectations towards the biological parents, they think that biological parents have insufficient insight into their behaviour and do not want to change. This attitude seems to be typical for foster parents' opinions of biological parents in most countries participating in the project.

3. Difficulties in the relationships² between biological families, foster families and social workers

This section focuses on difficulties in the relationships between biological families, foster families and social workers mentioned during the interviews.

Biological families. The biological parents (mothers and fathers) taking part in individual interviews included persons who pointed to difficulties in relationships with foster families and the children placed there:

² Social relation is understood as a type of relationship between acting subjects established by individuals and other persons, including the elements of social environment. One can distinguish several types of social relations, such as a transfer, exchange (trade or gift exchange), mutual sharing or symmetry and asymmetry of relations. Marynowicz-Hetka E. (2006), *Pedagogika społeczna. Podręcznik akademicki*, Vol.1 Warszawa, Wydaw. Naukowe PWN; Wagner A. (1998), *Reprezentujemy homogeniczny czy heterogeniczny paradygmat naukowy?*, in: *Pedagogika społeczna jako dyscyplina akademicka. Stan i perspektywy*, Cyrańska, E., Marynowicz-Hetka E., Piekarski J. (ed.), Łódź-Warszawa, Wydaw. UŁ, ŁTN, WSP, ZNP.

– Austria – there were only two comments on the frequency of meetings (Probably, more frequent meetings) and difficult relationships with the child (Sometimes I don't feel at all that I'm its mummy. Actually, I am only a visitor or an older friend). Most biological parents didn't talk about any difficulties in relationships with foster families or the children, as they had no contact with them.

– Switzerland – too many children in a foster family and, in consequence, the tiredness of the foster parent, no possibility of changing the original arrangements between the families (I'd like to have her stay overnight at my house, but the foster family is not very flexible here). Biological parents emphasise that foster parents should have common understanding on them, biological parents trust the foster care agency and their professionalism, also trust Foster Parents, a foster parents should build a good and constructive relationship with biological family. Difficulties connected with the relationships with the children result from their behaviour: He hangs out a lot and stays out till late at night, he also visits the local youth club; she is a great comedian and often lies to biological parents and it is difficult to trust her.

– Germany – “inappropriate”, in the opinion of a biological parent, behaviour and care of the foster family, embarrassment when the daughter called her foster mother “mum”. One of the mothers emphasised mistrust of the foster family when they said her daughter didn't want to go back to her biological family. Difficulties listed by biological parents include the fact that the children avoid contacts with their biological parents, they are unwilling to visit them, they don't want to return to the father, they are “closed”, they no longer trust their parents, and they are alienated. One of the fathers wanted to sever the relations with his daughter when she didn't want to return to him, distance and work hinder relationships, there is no help or support.

– Croatia – The foster family has little understanding for biological parents and wants no contact with them if possible. They only want to discredit and humiliate me in order to make more money on the back of my children; foster carer does not like me very much, she can't “stand me”.

– Poland – in their answers, the parents point to the hindering and limiting of contact with the children, misunderstandings and quarrels with foster parents, the possibility of meeting the children only outside the foster parents' place;

– Romania – not being familiar with the foster family the child was placed in, the social worker's refusal to organise the mother's meeting with the child, the child is too young for close relationships ("we've visited the child only once").

Foster families. Foster parents draw attention to the following difficulties in the relationships between biological parents and their children:

– Austria – foster parents don't mention any difficulties in relationships between the children and their biological parents;

– Switzerland – foster parents don't mention any difficulties in relationships between the children and their biological parents. They emphasise that there are children who don't contact their parents at all and children who maintain regular contacts with their parents, spend their time together, stay with them overnight, expect involvement and emotional support;

– Germany – the children are hurt by their biological parents, they are punished, rejected, the meetings are stopped, the children are ignored, the father sometimes confuses his children with his anger and calls them names, the child is devastated, starts panicking, suffers from eczema, migraine, cries, the child hits itself, tears its hair out, in the case of one of the children relationships with men were at first impossible, even if the foster parents were present. Foster parents notice the children's problems after they meet their biological parents, such as fitful sleep, difficulties with finding a subject of conversation. One of the foster mothers recalled a situation when the biological mother was full of anger, hostility and rivalry when the child called the foster mother "mum". Another mother noticed that the biological mother is afraid of her. Further, foster parents say that the biological parents are "instable, distracted";

– Croatia – foster parents don't give any examples of difficulties in relationships between the children and their biological parents;

– Poland – because of the distance to the place where the children stay, meetings with biological parents are infrequent or the children avoid contact, “shifting the responsibility for the child” onto foster parents, treating foster parents as “enemies”, which the child senses, inciting the children to rebel against their foster parents;

– Romania – empty promises given to the children. The answers of foster parents provide descriptions of dramatic events: being ashamed of the parents, their clothes and behaviour. Biological parents don’t participate in the life of the youngest children, and so there is distance between the children and their parents. One of the foster mothers believes that biological parents have too many rights allowing them to expect that the children will come back to their family, whereas their actual efforts in this respect don’t make the child’s return possible.

Foster parents give their opinions about biological families and the possibility of the children’s reintegration into their biological families, such as:

– Germany – at times, contacts with the mother or the father take place only in the presence of the foster family. The foster families’ opinions about biological families are the following: biological parents “maintain good relationships with the child but they also enjoy their freedom, as they don’t raise their child”, the mother is building a new relationship, according to foster parents, biological parents have missed many important events in the lives of their children;

– Poland – the placement of the child in a foster family has made life easier for the biological family (“life without any responsibilities”, “they don’t have to worry about their children”);

– Romania – changes should take into consideration the child’s interest, in some cases reintegration isn’t possible, the child’s contacts with the biological family should be limited, “I’m glad that there are fewer meetings of the child and its mother”, they don’t have to take care of their children, “I think the families who left the child at the hospital are in a better situation”. Some foster parents also say that they have no information about most of the children’s biological families.

Social workers. Difficulties in work with foster parents mentioned by social workers are related to the following issues:

– In Austria – the foster family does not or only after a (very) long period of hesitation get in touch when there are problems with the foster child, it's also difficult when foster parents try to solve problems on their own, even if they would need help, the foster family does not pass information about the original system to third parties (protection of privacy);

– In Switzerland – social workers feel unjustly blamed by the foster families for the way social services function and for the binding regulations; it is important to follow the rights and obligations related to the role fulfilled; foster parents should not adopt the role of the parents (they have to build up a close relationship to their foster child as well, in reality, this is hard to accomplish, because affection, love and binding don't keep with theoretical considerations; for foster parents as well as biological parents this is often the source of deep uncertainties);

– In Germany – sometimes the child's relationships with the foster family are so close that its return to the biological family can be painful; different perspectives: biological parents want the child to return, foster parents are attached to the child, which is why the situation is difficult; on the one hand, foster parents talk about devotion to the child and love, but on the other hand, they develop relationships with the child's biological family; the child is deeply affected by the "foster child status", in some cases the devotion of foster parents is too big, "they lose their private lives";

– In Croatia – difficulties related to the misunderstanding of the social welfare system, e.g. that the child has to visit their bad parents, which have a negative influence on them, lack of time, etc.; problems are also around children, which foster parents don't know how to resolve themselves;

– In Italy – minimising the child's problems by foster parents, the care project is not always implemented as agreed, it is not valued, decisions of the authorities are misunderstood;

– In Poland – foster families don't want to share information about their lives, "they want to be independent", they sometimes don't follow the social worker's guidelines, the related families copy the patterns of the biological families, if the social worker's relationships with the foster family are too close, an objective view of the situation is difficult, great-grandparents take care of the child, information is

withheld, there are problems with communication, complaints about the worker, too frequent phone calls from the foster parents in connection with, for example, interventions related to the child's behaviour;

– In Romania – foster parents sometimes treat the social worker “like a boss” or the social workers feel they have no prestige, foster parents aren't honest and conceal certain problems.

The difficulties of social workers in relationships with biological families concern the following issues:

– Austria – biological family is unreliable, difficult to assess, follows recurring life patterns, has hardly any solution strategies or future perspectives, does not comply with agreed visiting contacts or appointments to the authorities, tries to contact the child in ways that are not approved (calls at school, kindergarten etc.), resistance, no willingness to talk, reliability; competition; resistance; promising children to get them back home; alcohol; drugs; showing the children that they are the victims;

– Switzerland – need to ask the biological family for clarification on what they would consider a crisis; biological parents take less responsibility, need for professional helpers/legal advisors for foster children; some biological parents go through difficult situations like mental breakdowns, suffer from severe health problems etc., feel very ashamed, their self-esteem is very low, lack of energy, hopeless, sometimes makes them very aggressive, stranded. They then act very ignorantly and unrealistically towards their personal family situation and are not very cooperative.

– Germany – biological parents assume defensive attitudes, “they create their own reality”, they reveal ambivalence: “they promise a lot and then do nothing”, they get tangled in lies, they don't accept the situation when the child only visits the biological parents (they even threaten to sever the relations);

– Croatia – difficulties are related to lack of understanding of their rights and obligations; their lack of self awareness into their behaviour, problems with communication;

- Italy – disrespect for the rules of the child's care project, provocative attitudes towards foster parents, the biological parents' problems with understanding the conditions for the child's return;

- Poland – a mental disease of the parent makes the relationships more difficult, half-heartedness, irregular, inconsistent contacts with the child, unwillingness to cooperate at the first stage of work with the biological family, lying to social workers, verbal and physical violence towards the workers, addictions which enhance aggression;

- Romania – it is difficult to find biological parents, they often move, hide, they don't understand the childcare system and this is why it is difficult to reintegrate the children into their biological families.

Difficulties in relationships between foster and biological families noticed by social workers concern the following issues:

- Austria – the discrepancy between foster parents' and biological parents' needs is difficult to deal with; the difficulties result from the impossibility to maintain or the severing of relations by one of the parties, perceived slights on both sides because each one wanted to be the a "better mother", deprecated/denigrating approach when there are big social differences and there is rejection from both sides or from one side. Biological parents want to have on-going and, usually, more intense contact with their child, more than foster parents want, feel excluded and boycott cooperation, criticise and control the foster persons or they don't stick to the agreed rules for personal/on-the-phone contacts. On the other hand, there are foster parents who do not agree with how the biological parents treat their children and don't support the value of visiting contacts with biological parents and block them when, for example, a place for the contact needs to be found. Social workers also think it necessary to change the way they perform their work: as a social worker you would like to have (a lot) more time for continuous contacts with both the foster family as well as the biological family – not only in emergency situations or as controlling bodies, social worker regards the authorities and, thus, the social workers as a

controlling body rather than as a partner. There is high ambition to make no mistakes at all.

- Switzerland – social workers are aware of the difficulties resulting from cultural differences between the families. They believe that they need to work more and more on transnational (children are involved in cross border issues), have to handle cases with international dimensions which are increasingly complex, but feel not prepared for it.

- Germany – biological parents feel used when the child prefers to stay with the foster parents and only wants to visit them, the different ideas of foster and biological families of what is good for the child cause problems, rivalry for the child, the biological parents feel they are slandered before the child by the foster parents, one of the biological fathers made an “all or nothing” condition, biological families’ lack of trust;

- Croatia – foster families have much more expectations of the Social Welfare Centre, which itself it can’t meet; foster carers would like more financial support usually require one-time financial payment; in cooperation with the biological parents it is mainly lack of behavioural self-awareness, unwillingness to change; there is a communication problem between the foster carers and the parents; objections from the biological parents towards the foster carers – parents do not respect the decisions of the court and agreements;

- Italy – toughening positions, views, “everyone knows what’s best for the child”, foster parents sometimes don’t accept changes to the care project proposed by biological parents, foster parents fear that the biological parents won’t meet the conditions allowing the child to return to its biological family, biological parents fear that they will lose the child, resentments and anger of biological parents;

- Poland – demanding attitudes of biological parents towards related foster families, communication problems caused by low intelligence level and sometimes diseases;

- Romania – children don’t want to visit their biological families in too many cases, foster families’ fear of the Romani families, anger, rage towards the biological parents, condemning them for forsaking their children, foster parents’ high opinions of

themselves, rivalry between the families, the foster family sometimes refuses to cooperate with the biological family for fear of its effect on the child.

Summary

The third paragraph describes difficulties in a relationship between biological and foster families and social workers as pointed to during the interviews. Biological parents point out to difficulties in cooperation with foster parents related to building mutual trust, sometimes foster families are accused of making it difficult for biological parents to stay in touch with their child.

Foster parents emphasize difficulties that biological parents cause to their children, causing their anxiety, uncertainty as to their return to their biological family, competing with foster parents. All interviews' participants assess one another. The most important assessment is related to difficulties with mutual communication and their uncertainty concerning the reintegration of a child and his/her biological family.

Social workers talk about difficulties in cooperating with foster families (such as problems with parents openly informing them about behavior issues they have with a child, playing such difficulties down) and in cooperating with biological families (their defensive attitude or passiveness, unwillingness to participate in their child's life, disrupting the child's development by contacting him/her, ignorance of legal regulations and parental obligations). Some of the families participating in the interviews did not complain about any difficulties in relations, though.

4. Forms of aid used by families and social workers to overcome difficulties

Social workers were asked about the methods of solving problems identified in the relationships between the families. Social workers in individual countries pointed to the following methods:

– Austria – conversations and explaining the importance of visiting contacts with biological family and foster family, conversations with the biological parents to find out what makes the access/the acceptance so hard for them, obtain information when it comes to better involve the biological parents, mediate and inform to be able to plan and hold religious celebrations such as e. g. baptism and first communion and to obtain the biological parents' acceptance, coaching for the foster parents (e.g. additional measure psychological treatment), openly address it within a moderated group discussion and work together to find solution strategies, mediation, clarifying discussions, supervising visits;

– Switzerland – build up collaboration among stakeholders in area, ways to collaborate across government and nongovernment organisations as well as across regions. Get to know as many people as possible within Central Authority, get to know other organizations doing similar types of work, create a multidisciplinary and multi-topic panel of experts, invite more legal and judiciary professionals. They also suggest mediation, regular meetings and discussions with professional mediator/supervisor, biological parents would have liked to join the supervision of the foster parent right from the start. Social worker try to raise empathy for each other, explain the context, the system they are living in to foster mutual understanding. If biological parents are very unreliable, meetings with the case management team, attempts to support from different sides, in severe cases they apply sanctions (financial, e.g. reduce services etc.), give feedback to the department who checks the foster families;

– Germany – frequent visits of social workers to the families give the possibility of reporting the needs in advance, early provision of support, “clarity and honesty have a positive influence on the relationships of both sides”, creating a bridge between “two worlds”, explaining the roles performed, listening to the information provided by foster parents, talking to the children about their wishes and fears, pointing to the consequences of the adults' decisions for the child, patience, respect, consistency and intuition are important for the development of the situation, mediatory talks, help with planning the visits;

- Croatia – occasional training courses, cooperation, house visits (if time permits), less formal contact, consultation and explanations; keeping regular contact with the parents (but when a child is placed into care, then they are no longer willing to cooperate), team meetings;

- Italy – convincing biological parents to continue cooperation, convincing the parents to get to know the opinion of the other side, warmth in relationships, explaining the contents of the care project, involving the court or a supervisor in the relationships;

- Poland – determining the rules of cooperation with the families, talking about problems, improving their skills as social workers (communication skills, understanding emotions), taking part in training courses (gaining knowledge of such issues as the child's hyperactivity), being a member of interdisciplinary teams, talking to colleagues;

- Romania – meetings, consultancy, helping foster parents understand the children's right to get to know and meet their biological parents, proper preparation of meetings between the families and the children, taking active part in these meetings, facilitating discussions, giving courage to foster families so that they accept the fact that the children spend some time with their biological families, convincing foster parents not to speak badly of the Romani in the presence of the child, training courses for foster parents.

Foster families can use formal and informal aid. Formal aid the foster families from individual countries referred to includes the following:

- Austria – association of foster parents and consultant for foster parents, round tables for foster parents, support for foster families by JaW and early intervention, training, social workers, IJB team at kindergarten and support by employer. They expect more contact with authorities at a request, troubleshooting support from authorities, and they believe that protection through social insurance was a good step;

- Switzerland – Department of Family Welfare, Family Support Centre (counselling, psychological support, medical help, financial assistance), non-governmental organisations (counselling and psychological help, educational

training, psycho-social advice, personal coaching, peer self help groups), social workers/case workers (assistance), educational facilities (e.g. school), foundations, social network (friends, close family members), church or community (spiritual support);

- Germany – social workers of foster care centres, the advocate from the curative education help, supervisor for healthcare, the curative education early intervention;

- Croatia – the Social Welfare Centre, social workers, hospitals and speech therapists;

- Italy – cooperation with the Foster Centre, Adoption and Care Centre, Regional Family Support Centre;

- Poland – Local Social Welfare Centres (the support of psychologists, pedagogues, coordinators of the kinship placement), psychological and pedagogical counselling centres, a Centre for Early Developmental Support at a special purpose school and education centre, the Church;

- Romania – the workers of the Office, doctors, physiotherapists in case of physical problems, kindergartens. It has to be said that several of the foster families interviewed in Romania use no formal aid. According to these parents, there is no help, “the school is not a supportive and tolerant environment”, “the school tries to help but to no avail”.

Foster families receive informal help from their families, husband, parents, children, siblings and distant relatives. Further they mention neighbours (Romania), partners, friends (Germany, Switzerland). One of the foster parents added that “what helps is the reflection on one’s own experiences”.

Biological parents use formal help provided by non-governmental organisations, the children’s homes, Local Social Welfare Centres (Poland), psychologists, therapists, physiotherapists, case management group, (Switzerland), the Office (Romania), the Social Welfare Centre (Croatia), “Pomoc Rodzinie i Dzieciom” organisation (helping mothers with taking care of small children), midwives, charity (presents for Christmas, financial support), family doctors, psychiatric care, a social worker who helped to understand that the child has

changed (Germany), street workers and the trainers (job training), youth welfare service (flexible help), counselling (parent counselling, drug counselling), probation assistant and detoxification (Austria), the Church (Germany).

All parents (mothers) from Italy interviewed emphasised that they didn't use institutional help, three families from Romania (the mother has no information where to look for help, we have never asked anyone for help, only for information), one biological father from Germany.

Biological families receive informal help from their parents, neighbours, friends, foster families, grandparents, partners and children. Some biological parents can count on a partner or father only when they don't drink or use violence. They also mention other important persons ("the foster mother used to be a great help for me") and groups (mothers' meetings, "city living room"). One of the mothers from Romania emphasises that she has been independent for a long time, she doesn't ask anyone for help, but her mother is very ill so she can't ask her for anything. All biological parents from Croatia said that they didn't have any informal support from people close to them (they mostly meant financial support).

Biological parents also point to their expectations related to help with the child's return. Apart from their expectations related to material or financial conditions and employment, they point to the possibility of improving their parental skills and resourcefulness (Poland), they expect more chances to meet and discuss different issues, consultancy related to the children's education, support in creating favourable living conditions, e.g. finding a flat, mother's graduation (Germany). The parents' answers also reveal a belief that there is nothing more to be done and they have to wait for the court's decision (Romania).

Summary

Analysis of the forms of support used by families and social workers when overcoming difficulties shows that biological families declare the return of a child to its family, they declare using informal support (although not all of them may count on support from their relatives), but they have insufficient information concerning

institutional help and thus they do not take advantage of all the available options. Foster families emphasize their cooperation with social workers and various institutions (e.g. possibility to get educational training, social insurance), but they also value informal support. It was also noted during the interview that there are foster families that do not use any kind of support.

Social workers take action described fittingly by one of them as: building a bridge between “two worlds”, between biological and foster families, by providing conditions for cooperation, communication, mediation talks. Social workers indicate that supporting families requires their continuous education, participating in courses, trainings, workshops.

5. Cooperation between families and social workers – possible changes

This section of the report concerns the expectations and possible changes in the cooperation between the families and social workers from the point of view of the social workers.

According to social workers, some issues related to the cooperation with biological families require changes. The answers of the social workers were the following:

- Austria – biological parents sometimes express the need to completely sever relations with the social worker, which makes the cooperation difficult, and “it is important to communicate their own strengths to them, not losing the role of the parents”;

- Switzerland – more time to really support, hardly ever any time for informal information, which would be important to build up trust and support them in a more sustainable way; providing more parent education, transparency, social worker would like to reach the biological parents with services, wants to become a reliable partner;

- Germany – help with arranging meetings with foster families, living up to the biological families’ expectations in relation to the provision of information about

the child's development, taking part in decision-making processes concerning the child's issues, mediation within families;

- Croatia – unwillingness to change of biological parent behaviour and blaming others for their situation, lack of understanding from their side, get more engaged, they should be in regular contact with the children and visit them;

- Italy – more time to work with individual families, supporting them in the fulfilment of their obligations and undertaking parental tasks towards their children;

- Poland – a possibility of meeting the families “on neutral ground”, increasing the frequency of meetings (this favours accompanying the family and improves the effectiveness of work with them), supporting biological families in shaping their willingness to cooperate with social workers;

- Romania – more meetings with biological families, better organisation of the social workers' work, so that they don't have to cover large distances to meet the family, the shaping of such features in biological parents as: good behaviour towards the children, honesty, keeping promises, responsibility, giving the children a chance to be adopted or maintaining contact with them.

According to social workers, some issues concerning the cooperation with foster families also require changes. In their answers they pointed to:

- Austria – basic information prior to handover, clear structures in dealing with biological parents, feeling safety nets, clear distribution of roles;

- Switzerland – conservative lawmakers still believe that reunification is best, and they are the ones who determine how much funding is available for the foster parents. These are frustrating and disheartening to social worker as well, but for now limits within which social worker must work. Social worker's duty is to be a liaison between the parties, more documentation, clear, transparent agreements; regular coaching for the foster parents;

- Germany – maintaining the children's relationships with their cultural origins and biological families, support in the shaping of the foster parents' relationships with the children, cooperation with the contact person in case there are any problems or questions, mediation when the parties want to solve problems together, explaining the participation of individual persons (FF, Guardian, BF) in the

decision-making process, assuming a kind attitude towards the biological parents (some foster parents indicate that they don't want the child for their own but they will be a foster family as long as necessary), more time for the meetings which also should be more intense, the parents expect knowledge that will explain the child's trauma to them;

- Croatia – the expectations of the foster carers need to change and, if possible, for the foster care law to change;

- Italy – proper care of the child, following the plan, a change of thinking about the biological family, helping the foster family to identify with the child;

- Poland – greater activity of foster parents through participation in training courses, greater readiness to make changes and solve problems, better information flow, greater cooperation with the foster family aimed at the child's return to its biological family, burnout prevention, drawing clear boundaries in cooperation with foster parents;

- Romania – better communication, trust, raising the child by the foster parents as well as they can, more discussions about the children's issues, honesty, openness to the children's problems, the foster parents' greater attention to the child, more discussions about the biological families, more visits of social workers to foster and biological families, more meetings of the children and their biological parents, changing the way social workers are treated by the families ("like a boss"), foster parents shouldn't be afraid of social workers who are "friends rather than bosses", more self-support groups for foster families.

According to social workers, the conditions for successful cooperation between foster families, biological families and social workers are as follows:

- Austria – mutual understanding, clear rules for contacts (all people involved should be clearly informed about who is present and what functions they have); specific information often helps to change attitudes; information about the child and the current living conditions or answering the parents' questions often result in softening the hardened fronts; child realises that she/he is protected; the co-operation with the original system is substantial for the complaisant out-of-home care of the foster child in a foster family. The work with the parents regarding what they

want and what their goals are must not be neglected since that can/will also directly affect the child's well-being; understanding for the biological family with foster parents (mediation); more security for foster parents (supervising visits); reduce fears and apprehensions (counselling for foster parents); when they are perceived accepted with their needs they can more easily step into the background (counselling for biological family).

– Switzerland – social workers believe that cooperation between the families depends on the involvement of the families, children, and work with professionals: more opportunities and forums need to be created so that social worker, lawyers, judges can exchange their ideas, share expertise, and explore best practices and potential remedies. When conducting a social worker training, representatives from the legal profession should be included and vice-versa. When resources are being created on a child protection topic, all groups should receive the same information even if the delivery or particulars are adapted for each stakeholder's specific role and responsibilities; communication skills of all parties, more understanding and respect for each other's life situation.

– Germany – it would be perfect if adults shared one perspective on the care of the children, regular meetings of all sides, mutual creation of cooperation rules, cooperation plan, mutual recognition and appreciation, consistent pursuing of common goals, sharing information, each of the parties should develop the ability to revise its point of view when something changes, cooperation with different institutions, supervision, changes to the care system, clear framework of activity, care of the child's safety, supporting changes to the biological families' living conditions, developing mutual acceptance between foster and biological parents, and not stopping (changing the worker taking care of the family) the work of social workers with the given family.

– Croatia – more time for supervision and preparation of the foster parents, preparation of the child, the first contact, meetings and spending more time with the child, ensure conditions at the Centre; appropriate standards, mobility, accessibility of experts, continual possibility of supervision for foster carers and expert staff and further training.

– Italy – the foster care project should be well known to all the parties involved, true involvement of all parties in its development, attentive recognition of the child's needs, common goals in the care of the children, clear distribution of tasks, including the tasks of social workers who help foster and biological families;

– Poland – a neutral place of meetings between foster and biological families, the shaping of the readiness to cooperate, and then a positive attitude during the cooperation, identifying problems, giving the parents yet another chance, the ability to communicate, openness of all parties, sharing information between social workers working with foster and biological families, meetings of an interdisciplinary team;

– Romania – a greater number of meetings of all parties – social workers, foster families, biological families and the children, the social workers' expectations of their working conditions (more time for each case, fewer documents etc).

Summary

Social workers indicate in their answers that it is possible to transform the cooperation between families and social workers. Their proposals concerning cooperation with biological families include the issue of more time that a social worker can devote to one biological family, a clear specification of tasks the biological family should do in relation to their child, supporting biological parents in remaining active and present in the life of their child under foster care, counteracting disturbances in relations with a child caused by biological parents. Their proposals concerning cooperation with foster families are related to providing foster parents with information as complete as possible about the child and his/her family situation – a diagnosis that will allow for relevant support for the child. It is pointed out as necessary to support foster parents in shaping their attitude towards biological parents (accepting otherness, different values), in avoiding professional burnout.

When talking about their difficulties in cooperation with foster families, social workers also mentioned the possibility of getting support through trainings, workshops, and available psychological, educational, legal, and medical help. A

possibility that is being emphasized is constant work on improving communication skills, negotiating different solutions and mediating.

6. Recommendations for the practice

The last section of the report provides recommendations for the further stages of the FALEFOS project – workshops with foster parents, biological parents and social workers, and a guide meant for persons making efforts aimed at foster children. The FALEFOS project makes it possible to draw the attention of those involved in its implementation to the issues of the children and their families when the children are already placed in foster families. In view of the data on previous cooperation and difficulties it entailed, the expectations of foster parents, biological parents and social workers, the proposals of changes mentioned during individual and focus group interviews, the following issues seem inspiring for the further work:

- Approaching each situation of the children and their biological families individually, so that one can get a realistic view of the possibility of the children’s maintaining relationships with their biological parents, the possibility of reintegrating the children into their biological families (e.g. workshops for social workers and foster parents on identifying the possibilities and supporting biological parents in their relationships with children placed in foster care);
- Treating the children’s return to their biological families as a process, both from the point of view of the children’s relationships with the foster family and rebuilding their relationships with their biological families (e.g. workshops for social workers and foster parents on the complexity of the primary socialisation, the children’s entanglement in diverse and ambiguous social relations);
- Making the foster child’s aid plan/project a project of cooperation involving everybody – foster parents, biological parents, children and social workers. During meetings there can/should be discussions, arrangements, negotiation, respecting the rules of cooperation, responsibilities and their fulfilment, the identification of needs/expectations, searching for solutions together. Thus, what is needed is a physical space that is neutral to the families and the children, and time (regularity)

when the meetings can take place (workshops for all categories of people – families, social workers – on the foster child’s aid project, workshops for social workers on supporting biological and foster parents in establishing and maintaining cooperation aimed at foster children);

- Informing the children about all important issues related to their placement in foster care, even if they are very small (cf. the views of F. Dolto, E Pikler), which makes it possible for the children to get to know the target foster family, if possible, in the presence of a biological parent (workshops for biological parents on recognising their own situation and the situation of children and foster families, so that they are able to make a decision to place the child in a foster family);

- The shaping of interpersonal skills of all categories of people – the target groups of the FALEFOS project, including the shaping of their ability to talk, getting to know the rules of communication between family members, between families, between social workers and the families, and with the child (workshops for parents and social workers on interpersonal communication and conducting conversations);

- The issue of the temporary character of foster care in foster families can be characterised differently in each of the partner countries of the FALEFOS project. The reintegration of the children into their biological families is an issue considered individually, i.e. whether the child’s return to the biological family is possible or not. There is always the issue of the biological family’s history, the children’s identity and “roots” they have a right to know (workshops on talking to children about their biological parents);

- Biological parents, just like children, have a need and a right to maintain relationships (for example, workshops for biological parents on the manifestations – diverse and sometimes complex – of the children’s developmental disorders, their causes, a possibility of understanding and supporting the child by the biological parents, workshops informing them about their rights and obligations);

- Supporting foster families who help the children’s biological parents (workshops for foster parents on the possibilities and barriers to communication with biological parents who have numerous problems, on the values in relationships with the children’s biological parents);

- Supporting foster parents in identifying their problems related to their involvement in the roles of foster parents (workshops on the sense of omnipotence, losing one's own private life, a belief that “everything's for the children”, “losing” the biological children of foster parents), the foster parents' own contributions to the subjects of training courses;
- Supporting the cooperation between social workers working with different categories of families – biological and foster;
- Analysing the issue of a multicultural character of foster families, their relationships with the children and their biological families.

In the focused interviews some proposals were put forward that may complement recommendations for the practices concerning cooperation between the families and social workers. Below are the following proposals:

- Biological families should be supported and empowered during their child's stay in a foster family. It is then possible for the child to regain his/her contact with his/her biological parents, to emphasise the parents' authority and their responsibility towards the child and their parenthood (e.g. workshops devoted to analysis of possibilities of biological parents' co-participation in some of their parental tasks, everyday activities supporting the child staying in foster care).
- Cooperation of biological and foster families with social workers is difficult when expectations towards the three-sided cooperation are defined differently by each party. A good way to support all the participants may be creating self-help groups and learning from each other's experience (e.g. workshops devoted to developing the ability to establish such a group and maintain its activity).
- Cooperation between parents and social workers may be supported by experts (such as a psychologist, a psychiatrist, a counselor), working both in a group and individually.
- Specialist trainings for foster parents are necessary in order for them to react to changing needs of children facing an increasing number of problems (e.g. risks related to psychoactive drugs).

- It is a good practice to place a child in a foster family close to the place where his/her biological parents live.
- It is indispensable to provide foster parents with a complete set of information concerning the child and his/her situation.
- The requirements imposed on biological parents in order for their child to return to them should be clear.
- It is necessary to adequately and in a timely manner inform the foster children/youth on all relevant information regarding the fostering process.
- A cultural gap makes work more difficult. In order for the cooperation to be successful it is necessary to respect and accept cultural, social and economic differences of the parents. Respect is a value emphasized many times in relations between foster parents, biological parents, and social workers.

FALEFOS Project is a good occasion to create more cooperation between biological parents, foster parents and social workers and involving these actors also in the following project phases, organising regular meetings with them. Core issues that the workshop should address are: relationship between the three different actors of foster care (especially biological and foster parents) and on how to improve it, communication between parties, empathy, conflict solving skills, practices on how to change one's perspective and how to be creative in the framework of foster care, practical exercises, tips, space to exchange experience and opinions, with a particular focus on biological parents. Workshops shouldn't be too theoretical but they should include more practical methodologies.

The list of suggested workshops remains open. Careful reading of the final report, the reports on focus group interviews as well as the analyses of secondary sources prepared by individual partners can inspire to numerous interesting proposals.

An annexe

Table 1. Socio-demographic features of families who took part in individual interviews in different countries.

Categories	Socio-demographic features	Number of families						
		AT	CH	DE	HR	IT	PL	RO
<u>Foster family</u> Foster family type	Related	1				1	1	
	Non-related	1	3	3	5		2	
	- Vocational		1		1			
	- Specialist		1		1			
	- Multi-child	3	1			1		5
	- Part-time care					3	1	
	- Non-related, non-vocational						2	
- Kids-shelter type foster family				2				
- Others		2						
The time the foster family has functioned for	- 1-4 years	1	4	3	2	2		1
	- 5-8 years	1		1		1	2	
	- 9-12 years	3	1	1	3	1		1
	- 13 years or more							3
Marital status of foster parents	- Single parenthood	1					2	1
	- Marriage	4	5	4		4	3	4
	- Informal relationship			1				
Foster parents' own children	None		2					1
	They don't live with foster parents		2				3	3
	They live with foster parents		1	6		3	4	1
	The age of biological children							
	- 0-5 years							
	- 6-11 years			2		3	1	1
	- 12-17 years	1	1	5			2	1

	- 18 years or more	3	2		3		3	3
Foster children in the family	- 1 child	2	1	3		4	2	
	- 2 children	3		2		1	2	2
	- 3 children				1			1
	- 4 children		4				1	2
	Children's Age							
	Boys							
	- 0-5 years		1	3				1
	- 6-11 years	3	2		1	1	2	3
	- 12-17 years				1		2	2
	Girls							
- 0-5 years		1	1				4	
- 6-11 years	2	2	2				2	
- 12-17 years	1		1	1			3	
Number of children who returned to their biological families				1		4		
Number of children adopted/adoptable (RO)			1					3
Foster parents' age	Mothers							
	- 25-35 years							1
	- 36-45 years	1						1
	- 46-55 years	3						1
	- 56 years or more							
	Fathers							
	- 25-35 years							
	- 36-45 years							
- 46-55 years								
- 56 years or more	1						1	
<u>Biological family</u>								
Number of children placed in	- 1 child				3	4	3	5
	- 2 children				1	1	1	1

a foster family	- 3 children				1		1	
	- 4 children				1			
Biological parents' marital status	Mothers - Single parenthood	4	2		3	5		2
	- Married		2		1		3	
	- Informal relationship	1					1	3
	Fathers - Single parenthood							
	- Married				1		1	1
	- Informal relationship		1					
Number of children in the family	- 1 child	1	1		1		2	1
	- 2 children	2	2					
	- 3 children		1		2		1	
	- 4-5 children				2		2	2
	- 6-8 children							1
Other persons living with the biological family	Grandparents, partner's children, grandchildren etc	1	1					2
Biological parents' age	Mothers -19-24 years							1
	- 25-35 years						3	1
	- 36-45 years						1	1
	- 46-55 years							
	- 56 years or more							
	Fathers - 25-35 years							
	- 36-45 years							1
	- 46-55 years							
	- 56 years or more						1	

