



Concept mapping the needs of grandmothers who take care of their grandchildren in formal foster care in Flanders

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ABSTRACT

Concept mapping was used to identify the needs of grandparents who take care of their grandchildren in formal foster care in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium). One hundred and nine grandmothers were asked to describe their needs in response of the question: “What do you need to be a good foster parent for your grandchild(ren)?” Next, the unique responses were sorted by 41 grandmothers, and analyzed using multi-dimensional scaling and cluster analysis. Furthermore, grandmothers were asked to indicate the degree of importance of each statement. Twenty-eight unique responses were grouped into eight clusters. In descending order of importance these clusters referred to the parenting relationship with their grandchild, parenting conditions, support and trust in the future and the child’s schooling, collaboration with and support from the foster care agency, material conditions, social support from the wider context, respite care, and contact arrangements. Their needs resemble the needs of regular foster parents, with the exception of some specific needs related to their specific situation, such as feeling ‘out of step’ with innovations and new technologies, health issues, finding a balance between the grandparent role and foster parent role, and the need for a positive and reassuring vision of the future.

1. Introduction

Custodial grandparents are kinship caregivers who are responsible for the care of their grandchildren on a full-time base (Doley, Bell, Watt, & Simpson, 2015; Lee & Blitz, 2016). A distinction can be made between formal and informal grandparent caring arrangements (Doley et al., 2015). Formal grandparent caring arrangements, also referred to as foster grandparenthood (Van Oosteren, 2014a), are monitored within the framework of child welfare, informal caring arrangements occur independently of a legal framework (Doley et al., 2015). The literature shows that both the number of children brought up by grandparents (Kelley, Whitley, & Campos, 2011) and the number of foster grandparents is increasing (Dellmann-Jenkins, Blankemeyer, & Olesh, 2002; Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). Although the proportion of foster grandparents in formal foster care is increasing rapidly, they remain an underexplored group (Van Oosteren, 2014a, 2014b).

This paper describes research into what foster grandparents consider essential to be a good foster parent. A good understanding of this is vital for recruitment and retention (Brown, Ivanova, Mehta, Skrodzki, & Gerrits, 2013; Colton, Roberts, & Williams, 2008), and for

the development of appropriate assistance from service providers (Fruhauf, Pevney, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2015). What foster parents consider important to be a good foster parent can be conceptualized in two, interrelated groups of factors that overlap with each other. The first group concerns the conditions for a successful foster care placement. Examples of this include parenting skills and material preconditions such as adequate financial subsidies and the reimbursement of costs incurred (Buehler, Rhodes, Orme, & Cuddeback, 2006). The second group concerns satisfaction about the foster care situation and the feeling that needs are being adequately met. In Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium), several studies have been conducted into the support needs and satisfaction of foster parents (Bronselaeer, Vandezande, & Verreth, 2011; Van Holen, 2005; Van Holen, Vanderfaeillie, & Eerdeken, 2010; Van Holen, Vanderfaeillie, Vanschoonlandt, De Maeyer, & Stroobants, 2015; Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer, Gypen, & Belenger, 2016; Vanschoonlandt, Van Holen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, & Andries, 2014). Nevertheless, no specific research findings regarding the support needs and satisfaction of Flemish foster grandparents are available, because data on this target group were always analyzed and presented together with data on all (kinship)foster parents. In addition, research in Flemish foster

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grandparents regarding what they consider necessary to be a good foster parent is entirely absent.

We start with a description of the foster care system in Flanders. Next, a theoretical introduction is made to the specific characteristics of foster grandparents and the challenges they face. Subsequently, we examine the conditions that contribute to a successful kinship foster care placement, and describe the support needs and satisfaction of foster parents. We then present the research into what foster grandparents consider necessary to be a good foster parent using *concept mapping* (Trochim, 1989). Finally, the results and implications for practice are discussed.

1.1. Foster care in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium)

As in other countries, in Flanders an out-of-home-placement comes into view when the upbringing of a child in its birth family is endangered and/or the safety or the development of the child is threatened, and/or in-home care is not effective enough (Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, Carlier, & Franssen, 2017). In case of placement, family foster care is the first option of choice (Decreet houdende de organisatie van Pleegzorg, 2012). Five regional (provincially) foster care agencies are licenced for the screening and pre-service training of foster parents, the ongoing support for parents, foster parents and foster children, and the monitoring of the placement. A distinction is made between short-term and long-term foster care placements. Short-term foster care has a maximum duration of one year and is considered a temporary intervention aimed at reunification. If reunification is not possible within this period, a long-term solution for the child has to be found. Long-term foster care provides a more indefinite alternative living arrangement in the foster family and aims at creating permanency at the latest until the child reaches the age of 21 (Vanderfaeillie et al., 2017). However, even in long-term foster care, the option of reunification can be considered at any moment. Children can be placed in family foster care on a voluntary base or court ordered. In the latter case formal decisions are taken by a juvenile judge.

The number of family foster care placements has increased with 40% over the last 17 years, from 3929 foster care placements in 1998 up to 6534 foster care placements in 2015 (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 1998–2016). Within these figures, both the proportion of placements in kinship care, as well as the number of kinship foster families increased. In 1998 the percentage of placements in kinship care was 29%, and 30% of the foster families were kinship foster families. In 2015 kinship placements already accounted for 57%, and 54% of all foster families were kinship foster families (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 1998–2016). Foster grandparents are an important group of kinship carers. Their numbers have also increased in recent years. In 2005 foster grandparents accounted for 29% of kinship foster carers, in 2010 for 41% (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 1998–2016). Since 2012 these data are unfortunately no longer available.

1.2. Foster grandparents: a specific group with specific challenges

Several difficulties or problems associated with foster grandparenthood are reported in the literature. Based on the subsequent literature, eight themes are distinguished, namely: (1) the bond between foster grandparent and parent, (2) shame about the failure of their own child (the parent), (3) being unfamiliar with innovations and new technologies, (4) grandparent role versus foster parent role, (5) psychological and health problems, (6) concerns about the future, (7) social isolation and (8) financial difficulties.

First, tense relationships and conflict between the parents and foster grandparents can hinder a successful placement, can complicate making arrangements, and can increase stress in the foster grandparents (Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler, & Cox, 2007; Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Juffer, 2013; Kelley et al., 2011; Lee, Clarkson-Hendrix, & Lee, 2016; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000).

Second, foster grandparents may experience feelings of loss, shame, anger and guilt over the failure of the parent (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002; Lee & Blitz, 2016; Lee et al., 2016; Van Oosteren, 2014b). They report that it is difficult to accept that their own child was unable to care for and take responsibility for their grandchild (Bowers & Myers, 1999; Kelley et al., 2011).

Third, foster grandparents may feel 'out of step' with innovations and new technologies (Lee & Blitz, 2016). Foster grandchildren grow up with other cultural norms and values than those of the foster grandparents (Backhouse & Graham, 2012; Bisschop, 2008; Choy & Schulze, 2009; Lee et al., 2016). Due to differences in education and training levels between generations, foster grandparents may be less aware of new developments such as multimedia (Löbel, 2014), they don't know how to protect their grandchildren from cyber bullying, and how to report bullying on the schools' web-based systems (Lee & Blitz, 2016). Another element relating to this theme is the lack of knowledge about their eligibility for social services and the unfamiliarity with social, medical and legal systems, and with school administration (Fruhauf et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Blitz, 2016; Van Oosteren, 2014b).

Fourth, caregiving requires that grandparents make shifts in the roles that they hold in their families, which can lead to role conflict and confusion (Lee & Blitz, 2016). Foster grandparents can experience feelings of loss as a result of the change from the traditional grandparent role to the role of grandparent as 'parent' (Backhouse & Graham, 2012). Whereas generally speaking the grandparent's position revolves around spoiling the grandchild and fun activities, as foster parents, grandparents must assume the daily care of their grandchild (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002; Standing, Musil, & Warner, 2007). Taking up parenting tasks again can be overwhelming (Shore, 1990 cited in Bowers & Myers, 1999).

Fifth, high levels of physical and psychological health problems in foster grandparents are reported (Coleman & Wu, 2016; Fruhauf et al., 2015; Glaser, Di Gessa, & Tinker, 2014). Foster grandparents can experience feelings of fatigue, stress, parenting stress, depression, fear and anxiety (Coleman & Wu, 2016; Dellmann-Jenkins et al., 2002; Doley et al., 2015; Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Glaser et al., 2014; Gleeson, Hsieh, & Cryer-Coupet, 2016; Jendrek, 1994; Kelley et al., 2011; Minkler & Roe, 1993; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000). On a physical level there may be insomnia, back and stomach pain and an increase in chronic conditions or complaints (Minkler & Roe, 1993; Minkler, Roe, & Price, 1992). Their higher age, as well as the daily care of a foster child, increase the risk of health problems in grandparents (Carr, Gray, & Hayslip, 2012; Cuddeback, 2004; Hayslip & Hicks Patrick, 2006). Foster grandparents sometimes ignore their own health problems because they are so overwhelmed by their new role as foster parents of their grandchild (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002; Minkler et al., 1992).

Sixth, foster grandparents often worry about the future, among other reasons, because of aging issues (Lee & Blitz, 2016). They ask themselves what will happen to their foster grandchild and who will raise them when they are no longer there or able to foster (Backhouse & Graham, 2012; Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Blitz, 2016; Minkler & Roe, 1993).

Seventh, foster grandparents often experience feelings of social isolation, loneliness and a lack of social support (Fruhauf et al., 2015). They feel different to other grandparents, who are not responsible for the daily upbringing of their grandchildren (Dunne & Kettler, 2008; Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, Miller, & Driver, 1997; Wohl, Lahner, & Jooste, 2003). Foster grandparents often lose part of their social network (Baldock, 2007), often feel isolated from peers (Lee et al., 2016; Lee & Blitz, 2016), and experience explaining why their child can no longer care for their grandchild as painful and embarrassing (Dunne & Kettler, 2008). Furthermore, difficulties associated with the foster care placement can put pressure on the partner relationship (Dunne & Kettler, 2008).

Finally, foster grandparents often have fewer financial resources,

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