



# Foster parents' coping style and attitudes toward parenting



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 June 2014

Received in revised form 12 February 2015

Accepted 17 March 2015

Available online 25 March 2015

### Keywords:

Foster care

Foster parents

Coping

Parenting

Attitudes toward parenting

## ABSTRACT

Foster parents have the greatest influence on the well-being of a foster child. A good selection procedure is needed to recruit capable and high quality foster families, and to reduce the risk of breakdown. Therefore we examined the coping style of foster parents and their attitudes toward parenting. The attitudes toward parenting and the coping style of 188 Flemish non-kinship foster parents were examined using a Dutch version of the Adult–Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2) and a Dutch version of the short form of the Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS-SF). Flemish foster parents had average scores on the four subscales or were at medium risk for negative parenting. Only for the two subscales inappropriate expectations and role reversal half of the foster parents had positive attitudes toward parenting. A total foster parents ranging from 0.5% to 8% were at high risk for negative parenting. No foster and family characteristics were associated with attitudes toward parenting. Foster parents use all of the four different coping styles (task-oriented, emotion and avoidant (treat oneself and find a friend) coping). The preferable coping style is for half of the foster parents taskoriented coping. An emotional coping style could be predicted by age and total years as foster parents. This research shows that foster parents were at medium risk for negative parenting and prefer a taskoriented coping style to handle foster care problems.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2011, in Flanders 3641 foster parents realized 6371 foster placements (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 2012). Children who enter the foster care system, have experienced a disruption in the primary-caregiver relationship. Besides that, many children have been exposed to maladaptive care giving (Wotherspoon, O'Neill-Laberge & Pirie, 2008) and expose behavior problems (Cox, Orme & Rhodes, 2003; Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer & Robberechts, 2013). Foster parents are expected to take care of a child, understand the child's background and help the child to his/her further development (school, medical and psychological health, etcetera). Foster parents have the greatest influence on the well-being of a foster child (Fanshel and Shinn, 1978 in Orme & Buehler, 2001). Therefore the complex task of being a foster parent isn't easy to accomplish. A good selection procedure is needed to recruit capable and high quality foster families, and to reduce the risk of breakdown. Given that pivotal role of foster families it's important to have a clear view on the coping style of foster parents and their attitudes toward parenting. Information about foster parents' attitudes toward parenting and their styles to handle problems, whether or not these are parenting problems, can inform

the practitioners about the support foster parents may require in order to ensure placement stability and quality.

First, for a good understanding of our results, we briefly describe the organization of foster care in Flanders. Next we review the research regarding attitudes toward parenting and coping and formulate the research questions. Finally we report and discuss the results.

### 1.1. Family foster care in Flanders

In Flanders, when children are in need of out-of-home care, family foster care is increasingly the first option of choice. In 2012 foster placements made up 42.33% of all the out-of-home services (e.g., group homes, family homes, family foster care) (Agentschap Jongerenwelzijn, 2012).

Seventeen foster care agencies are responsible by law for the selection and pre-service training of foster parents, the ongoing support for foster parents and the monitoring of the foster placement (Besluit van de Vlaamse regering inzake de erkenningsvoorwaarden en de subsidiën voor de voorzieningen van de bijzondere jeugdbijstand, 1994).

Legally, Flemish aspirant foster parents have to meet three criteria: be older than 18 years, be in good health and have a Police Clearance Certificate. In addition almost all foster care agencies use some 'excluding' criteria as having a stable relationship, the last year not experienced a big lifetime change, not being pregnant or waiting for adoption, having a positive motivation, etcetera. Those criteria are based on experience

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and on what the foster care workers think is a good practice (De Maeyer, Klingels, Vanderfaeillie & Van Hoken, 2012). All Flemish foster care agencies consider the five *Samenwerking Teamgeest Aspirant Pleegouders* (STAP) competencies as important required skills and competencies as well: i.e. being able to communicate openly and clearly, being able to collaborate in a team and share parenthood, being capable of helping children in changing their behaviors and in developing a positive self-image and being aware of the impact that fostering might have on their own family life (loss and grief) (Pleegzorg Vlaanderen, 2010). As part of the selection procedure, non-kinship foster parents have to complete a pre-service training. Most foster care agencies use a modified version of the STAP program, which is similar to the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) (De Maeyer et al., 2012; Mayers-Passtor, 1987), during which following topics are discussed in individual and group sessions: motivation to foster, collaboration, attachment, challenging behaviors of foster children, parenting skills and the impact of foster care on the foster family. A team of selection foster care workers use the legal criteria, the STAP competencies and the topics discussed in the individual and group sessions to substantiate their decision whether aspirant foster parents can become foster parents (De Maeyer et al., 2012).

Flemish foster parents are considered volunteers, they receive a daily expense allowance (in 2012, €13), independent on the child's need and foster family income. While foster parents are foremost parents who are taking care of someone else's child, Flemish foster parents are more considered to be paraprofessionals as well (helping parents, being an active member of the foster care agency, etcetera) (Van den Bruel, 2012). Until now foster care was seen as a temporary intervention with reunification as the goal. The concept of permanence and growing to adoption is in Flanders unknown. Recently voices are raised for permanency, in order to offer continuity to foster children with respect to the child needs of safety and stability.

## 1.2. Attitudes toward parenting

Foster care is a full-time substitute parental care (Gillis-Arnold, Crase, Stockdale & Shelley, 1998), where the primary role of foster parents is parenting (Orme & Buehler, 2001). Parenting contributes to children's social and emotional adjustment (Orme & Buehler, 2001) and has impact on the general and specific development of the foster child (Harden, D'Amour Meisch, Vick & Pandohie-Johnson, 2007). According to Orme and Buehler (2001) much research has been done on different dimensions of foster parenting: foster parenting behavior (discipline and control, empathy, expectations), quality of parent-child interactions, parenting stress, parenting satisfaction, attachment, acceptance, etcetera. Combs-Orme and Orme (2014) define parenting as parental attitudes, knowledge and behavior. Although in foster care, research on attitudes toward parenting is rare.

Attitudes can be defined as a psychological tendency, a predisposition, and a reaction to that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity, an object or situation with some degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly, 1992 in Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998; Holden & Edwards, 1989 in Budd et al., 2012). It is believed that attitudes are a generalized model (or several models) of how parents should behave (Combs-Orme & Orme, 2014). Hereby attitudes are filters that indirectly affect parental behavior (Holden, 1995 in Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998) and in turn affect child outcomes. Even though the relationship between attitudes and behavior are areas of continuing study (Budd et al., 2012); insight on the parental attitudes can help to understand the parental behavior and the child's development (Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998). Measuring attitudes is a way to investigate the parenting milieu in which children are reared (Harden et al., 2007). Moreover it can help to investigate the general parenting processes, as well as parenting in high-risk contexts. To ensure the quality of foster care it's important to know and investigate the foster parents' attitudes toward parenting.

In our knowledge there is little research on foster parents' attitudes toward parenting. Lee and Holland (1991 in Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998) examined the attitudes of untrained foster parents and subjects participating in the MAPP by using the Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI). The AAPI assesses parenting and child rearing attitudes of adolescent and adult populations (Bavolek & Keene, 2010). Responses on the AAPI give information on the risk of negative parenting and on the positive or negative attitudes concerning the four subscales: (a) inappropriate expectations, (b) lack of empathy, (c) parental value of corporal punishment and (d) parent-child role reversal. The subscale (a) inappropriate expectations measures parents' apprehension of normal child development and needs, the subscale (b) lack of empathy assesses the ability to be aware of the child's needs and feeling, and the ability to create an environment that promotes children's growth. The subscale (c) parental value of corporal punishment measures the value of parents on corporal punishment or alternatives to corporal punishments. The fourth subscale, (d) parent-child role reversal sees if parents act like appropriate parents or more like needy children looking to their children for parental care. For each subscale norm scores ranging from 1 to 10 can be computed; scores above 7 represent low-risk for negative parenting, moreover positive attitudes. Scores below 4 represent high risk for negative parenting, negative attitudes.

In Lee and Holland's study (1991, in Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998) both groups scored similar on the four subscales. Most of the scores on the four subscales represented medium to high risk for negative parenting or less positive attitudes toward parenting.

Orme et al. (2004) examined with the AAPI the functioning of 161 foster care applicants. They found that between 11 and 24% exhibited high risk for negative parenting: problematic expectations, empathy and parent-child role reversal.

Richardson, Foster and Mc Adams (1998) investigated the attitudes toward parenting of treatment foster parents, also with the AAPI. Treatment foster parents were at low risk for negative parenting and represent positive attitudes. Gillis-Arnold et al. (1998) studied the attitudes of non-adoptive and adoptive foster trainees. Adoptive trainees had more positive attitudes measured by three AAPI subscales. They had better parental expectations, valued alternatives to physical punishment and had high levels of empathy toward children's needs. On the other hand non-adoptive trainees had more appropriate parent-child roles measured by the AAPI subscale (Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998). Moreover they found that education and race contribute to explaining variation in the attitudes measured by the AAPI subscales. White female and higher educated trainees displayed more positive attitudes (Gillis-Arnold et al., 1998). Richardson et al. (1998) found that foster parents' gender, education and age significantly correlated with their attitudes measured with the AAPI. Females displayed more positive attitudes (for three of the four subscales, not the subscale expectations). Higher educated and younger parents showed more empathy and had more appropriate parent-child roles. In the study of Orme et al. (2004) spouses exhibited a significant, but low agreement on three of the subscales (expectations, empathy and parent-child role reversal).

In the search for good, effective, non high-risk foster parents, it's important to know their attitudes toward parenting and to examine the possible determinants of positive/negative attitudes.

## 1.3. Coping-style

Coping is defined by Lazarus and Launier (1978) as cognitive and behavioral efforts to master, reduce or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by a stressful transaction (Jaspers, van Asma & van den Bosch, 1989). Coping-resources, coping-styles and coping-behavior are three different concepts of coping (Jaspers et al., 1989). Resources are the attitudes and skills that influence coping behavior (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). A coping-style is a generalized strategy, an individual, typical, preference to approach and handle problems. Coping-behavior represents the approach of a problem in a

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