

KÁTAINÉ LUSZTIG ILONA¹**Recreational Activities in Foster Families in Bács-Kiskun County
between 2011–2014**

I was interested in the fact how foster parents with different social, cultural and educational background meet the requirements of leisure activities. This issue cannot be examined without considering the real environment in which children live. How do children living in their own families and children with similar social background usually spend their leisure time? To answer this question, I needed a control group of children to compare children in foster families to. Therefore I also asked the pupils (mostly living with their own families) of two primary schools about their leisure activities during my research. There were both disadvantaged and multiply disadvantaged children among the pupils. I made a comparison between the variety of leisure activities and the social contacts during the leisure activities in both groups: children living in foster families and children living with their own families.

Research topic: leisure time in foster families

I focused my research on the leisure habits and possibilities of children who are in a special situation (involved in child protection care, living with foster parents). The question is whether the leisure activities of children living in foster families differ from the activities of children living with their own family. In my opinion we should look for the answer in the life of children with their previous family. Children who live with their own parents definitely acquire family patterns either in a good or a bad way; they possess some cultural heritage and cultural capital. Primary family education has to be taken into consideration, the acquired cultural capital (according to Bourdieu) is formed by the conditions of the first acquisition. If a child has wrong experiences or wastes the time to acquire these experiences, correcting the result takes longer (Bourdieu, 1998). This correction can be carried out in the foster family if the foster parents pay particular attention to developing the personality of the child and to setting a positive pattern. Foster parents have the following in common: they all undertake the education and care of other parents' children. Child protection service – involved in education – is necessary if the child is endangered by its family or by its own deviant behaviour. Within the framework of replacement protection the child has to be placed in a foster family if it is possible. I am going

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to examine the leisure activities of children situated in foster families in this study. The issue of useful leisure activities has already been raised earlier within the child protection service: its importance already appeared in the practice of child protection during the 1970s and 1980s as it was determined to be the task of foster parents.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of my research is to examine whether the requirements concerning useful leisure activities are met during foster care. It is known that leisure activities provide an ideal ground for activities that develop personality and prefer personal fulfilment, therefore they are very important in the life of children who grow up in child protection. That is the reason why it is important to examine the benefits of leisure activities in foster care.

Research site

Child protection is traditionally based on the autonomy of counties. Its features vary according to this system and according to the socio-geographical context (Varga, 2015). My research was carried out in Bács-Kiskun County, where the number of children living in foster families is more than 1000. The survey concerning children living in foster families was carried out in 2011 at the foster parent network provided by the Regional Child Protection Specialised Service of the Bács-Kiskun County Self Government.

Research questions

In order to examine the leisure activities of children in foster families, I have compiled the following questions for my research:

- do foster parents contribute to the useful leisure activities of the children under care;
- is there a difference in the patterns of leisure activities concerning children living in foster families and own families;
- are there any varied cultural, sport and leisure activities provided for children and youth under care;
- are the conditions set to ensure a chance to overcome their disadvantages?

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Hypotheses

I assume on the basis of the topics examined:

- 1) The variety of leisure activities provided by the foster family and the own family does not show a significant difference.
- 2) Autonomous decisions made by the children concerning their leisure activities are influenced more likely by the foster parents.

Sampling for the research

As for sampling, I applied document analysis of the data sheets of children taken into care between 2005 and 2010 for at least a year. Samples had to meet two criteria: the children selected had to be between 6 and 18 years of age and they had to be pupils at a school. There were pupils from different schools, such as mainstream schools, schools with different curricula and secondary schools (vocational, secondary technical and grammar schools). The data sheet system records the child's life spent in the child protection system from the primary care to fostering and until the termination of fostering.

Regarding the composition of the families participating in the research: the 151 children selected live with 54 foster parents. Their age ranges from 6 to 18, all of the children are primary or secondary school pupils. According to the type of settlements, 31 foster parents live in a city, 20 foster parents live in a village, and 3 persons live in the outskirts of a city.

As for control groups, I chose 2 school groups: a group of 138 pupils from a school with different curricula and a group of 39 pupils from a mainstream school. I tried to choose public educational institutions where the social status of the pupils does not differ significantly from the conditions of the children under care.

Research methods and the way of analysing statistics

I applied both quantitative and qualitative methods in my research. Questionnaires provided the data collection for the quantitative research. As for qualitative research methods, I applied document analysis and interviews. The data provided by the questionnaires were recorded in the statistics program SPSS 2.1. In order to get the main features of the sample I applied descriptive statistical tests.

Summary of the leisure activities of children under care

The primary aim and task of fostering is to provide a permanent and safe environment where children have the possibility to familiarize with family patterns. They can learn the rules, the behaviour required by the society and adapt to social standards. Foster parents are all different: their qualifications, environment, educational purposes, lifestyles, knowledge, culture are varied, therefore the patterns provided by them are also different. They have one thing in common: they have to integrate, care, educate and prepare those children for life who come from a different social environment. The requirements set by the operating foster parent networks are the same for all foster parents. Their duties are determined by legislation, their education activities are monitored continuously. They have an important role in strengthening the children's learning motivation and in involving the children in curricular and extra-curricular leisure activities. Foster parents have to provide the required conditions for this and they have to support children in spending leisure time usefully after the compulsory tasks both at school and at home. They have to do what they can to prevent their foster child from any harmful addictions. Spending leisure time helps children with socialization and later on with integrating into the society. We must not ignore that the different social status, qualification and interest of the foster parents may have a significant impact on the education of children. However, they have the same duties, they have to meet the same requirements concerning education and care. Otherwise the operating institution can terminate the foster parent status. Professionals working in child protection provide help for the foster parents with managing leisure time, choosing leisure activities and they cooperate in organizing programmes for foster parents and children.

There are several activities in foster families that can be done together: baking, barbecue, camping, having lunch in a restaurant, going to an outdoor swimming-pool, walking along the river, taking the dog for a walk, watching TV, hiking, going on holiday, doing some DIY, family celebrations. Joint programs have an outstanding role.

I asked the children – both children living with their own family and children under foster care – what leisure time means to them. Most of them said it was very important for them: they spent their leisure time alone or with their friends. Lots of them help their parents and grandparents with the housework. They like taking care of animals around the house. Their most frequent leisure activities involve some sports: football takes the first place, which is followed by horse riding and cycling. They like taking walks and spending time outdoors, in nature. They also like drawing and reading. Some children attend a dancing course, others sing in a choir or play some musical instruments (drums, guitar). They like talking to their friends and their relatives as well.

It has been experienced that lots of children in foster families managed to avoid harmful addictions due to shared experiences and their favourite leisure activities. As a result, they could successfully integrate themselves later on. Other activities involve activities that are not represented in other groups of activities. As for the children under care, their most frequent activities are related to practising exercises for school – this happens besides curricular development activities and learning at home. Foster parents reported during the interviews that many of the children needed revision of the homework with questions. In addition, leisure programmes involved going to a playground, work, community programmes, scouting, protection of the environment, being together with own biological siblings. These programmes also involved leisure time spent after school and outside the home of the foster family: leisure time spent in a student's hostel, foreign exchange programmes organized by the foster parent network, rural tourism, a sowing course, language learning and language courses, attending a music school and playing in a wind instrument orchestra.

Children prefer their leisure time the most if they can do what they like doing. Different games and relaxation are important for them. A lot of them consider learning as a leisure activity. They like using the computer or the tablet. Some of them take part in church programmes, they are also members of a congregation or they read the Bible. Lots of them wrote that they were having a good time in their leisure time. Unfortunately, some children reported about harmful forms of leisure activities such as „smoking a joint”, „flash”, hanging around, being bored all day long. It occurred, however, only in some cases.

Conclusions

I have drawn the following conclusions on the basis of my hypotheses:

1. Variety of the leisure activities provided by the foster families and the own families does not show a significant difference.

According to document analysis, leisure activities of children living in foster families does show a great variety but it does not show a significant difference compared to the programmes provided by the own family. The proportion of curricular and extra-curricular activities is considerable. Most of the foster children were enrolled into day-care workshops or prep-room activities by the foster parents (sampling for the research was carried out before the introduction of the all-day school system). More than 70% of the children under care participated in a school event. Being involved in school events is considered to be important by the operators of the foster parent network. It is essential for the integration of the children in the school that the foster parents should provide the same conditions for the child as biological or own families can provide. The child protection service monitors this obligation concerning the foster parents. The child must not be placed at a disadvantage compared to its school mates and class mates in this issue. Integration at school is important here, it is one of the prerequisites of successful studies.

2. Autonomous decisions made by the children concerning their leisure activities are influenced more likely by the foster parents.

According to the results of my research, foster parents of children with disadvantaged and hazardous backgrounds provide a wide range of curricular and extra-curricular leisure activities, which is required for the development of the children's personality. Biological parents, however, control the spending of leisure time to a greater extent. The qualification of foster parents have only a partial impact on this process, as foster parents are under the control of the system. As a result, they cannot hinder their foster children in their further education and in the development of their talent either deliberately or because of the foster parents' insufficient education. It has to be admitted, however, that the habits, value and interests of the foster parent can certainly influence the foster child's life, since it is confronted with these issues every day in the foster family. The type of activities preferred by the foster parents in their own families is influenced by their qualification in any cases, therefore it can have an indirect impact on the foster child as well. I consider my second hypothesis to be confirmed as long as the continuous instruction and monitoring of foster parents guarantee the variety of leisure activities. It has to be added that foster care shows the variety similar to the variety in the case of children growing

up in their biological families on the basis of supervisory requirements. As a result, the variety of foster children's leisure activities does not depend on the qualification of foster parents.

How are leisure time and child protection related? Child protection belongs to occupations (jobs), where professionals undertake a difficult task. Children with multiplied disadvantages have to be supplied with a home, besides they have to be familiarized with issues, events and processes of the world. These issues and events were possibly not available in their previous life for any reason. Spending leisure time usefully is important for children because they can make new experience and can gain new knowledge. Furthermore, it is important because they can also find pleasure in doing these activities. The features of the leisure activity – its meaningfulness, regularity, intensity etc. – can definitely have an impact on the personality development of an individual or else it may determine this development. That is the reason why small children have to be provided with possibilities to spend free time intelligently and constructively. They have to be supported and guided, because this is also a part of the learning process. Children growing up within child protection services have in many cases behaviour, integration and learning problems due to the faulty or missing mother-child relationship. They often hardly know their parents or relatives or have only superficial contacts with them. They have only little information about their roots. They do not know what they have brought from their families or what talent their relatives had. They need support to make the most of themselves and improve their talent. Some positive patterns have to be provided as well. Major Zsolt Balázs wrote about child protection: „Child protection is an individual job, profession. Neither pedagogical nor psychological knowledge alone is able to support the everyday tasks of the professional work. If we do not look at child protection tasks with an eclectic approach (which aims deep understanding and involves „looking behind the scenes”) we will have the impression to be helpless, that we „do not have any tools in our hands”. And we will not have any tools unless we look at the depth of things and unless we understand what happened or what is happening in the souls of the foster children (Major, 2009, p.194).

I am very glad that in the past years child protection professionals recognized the importance of leisure activities for the optimal development of the children. The services in my county provide more and more events, adventure weekend programmes and various sport and cultural programmes for the foster children. Useful leisure activities seem to be more and more important within the child protection service. We can support the more favourable development of the children's personality and self-awareness with it. I believe that everybody has some good traits; it is possible to bring up foster children to be motivated and valuable

persons who succeed in the integration process into the society. All they need is suitable help and useful leisure activities.

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