



FOSTER PARENTING – A PROFESSION OR A PASSION FOR HELPING? SELECTED ASPECTS OF FAMILY FOSTER CARE

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Abstract. Family foster care is a form of temporary care for children who, for various reasons, cannot grow up in a biological family. Fostering the all-round development of children in family foster care in line with their potential and individual abilities at different stages of development is the primary task of foster carers. This article presents elements concerning the operation of family foster care: it characterises family foster care, children referred to a foster environment, requirements for foster carers and also indicates statistical data on the subject.

RODZICIELSTWO ZASTĘPCZE – ZAWÓD CZY PASJA POMAGANIA? WYBRANE ASPEKTY FUNKCJONOWANIA RODZINNEJ PIECZY ZASTĘPCZEJ

Słowa kluczowe: rodzicielstwo zastępcze, dziecko, rodzinna opieka zastępcza

Streszczenie. Rodzinna piecza zastępcza jest formą tymczasowej opieki nad dziećmi, które z różnych powodów nie mogą wychowywać się w rodzinie biologicznej. Wspieranie wszechstronnego rozwoju dziecka w rodzinnej pieczy zastępczej zgodnie z jego potencjałem oraz indywidualnymi możliwościami na różnych etapach rozwoju stanowi podstawowe zadanie w obszarze wychowania, jakie spoczywa na opiekunach zastępczych. W artykule przedstawiono elementy dotyczące funkcjonowania rodzinnej pieczy zastępczej: scharakteryzowano rodzinną pieczę zastępczą, dzieci kierowane do środowiska zastępczego, wymagania względem opiekunów zastępczych oraz wskazano dane statystyczne w zakresie podjętego tematu.

Introduction

Foster care is a form of temporary child care, i.e., provided until the normalization of their life situation, and involves ensuring all broadly understood needs in terms of proper functioning. Foster families take over most of the functions and tasks that should be performed by the child's biological family. The legal provisions in force in Poland regarding the organization of foster care for children have been defined in the Act of June 9, 2011, on Supporting the Family and the Foster Care System (Journal of Laws of 2023, items 1426, 1429). According to the Act, "the foster care system is a set of people, institutions, and actions aimed at providing temporary care and upbringing to children in cases where their parents are unable to provide care and upbringing" (Act, 2011, art. 2, item 2). Placement of a child in a foster environment most often improves their material, living, educational situation, and also changes their social functioning and school situation.

Efforts in the organization of foster care require the cooperation of various institutions and specialists from diverse fields and professions, including educators, psychologists, foster care coordinators, and family court judges. The methods of support undertaken, both familial and institutional, are part of the functioning of the welfare sector institutions and combine the work and social passion of those who are concerned about the fate of abused and abandoned children. The presented article is based on the analysis of source materials concerning the issue of foster care and the analysis of existing data. The article addresses issues related to the functioning of foster care: it characterizes foster care, children directed to a foster environment, requirements for foster carers, and also provides statistical data on the topic addressed.

Foster care for a child

The family is the best educational environment for a child at every stage of their development. In situations where there are irregularities in its functioning and the family is often unable to cope with the problem on its own, support from institutions and organizations engaged in helping the child and family is necessary. Assistance to the family should precede help directed to the child themselves and should operate in such a way as to comprehensively secure the family's needs and prevent its dysfunctions. However, if – despite the support

provided – the family is unable to ensure the care and upbringing of the child, the child is placed under one of the forms of foster care. The governing legal act in this area is the Act on Supporting the Family and the Foster Care System of June 9, 2011, along with subsequent amendments (Journal of Laws of 2023, items 1426, 1429), which defines forms of supporting families having difficulties in fulfilling caregiving and educational functions, as well as principles for the provision of foster care. The legislator, in the preamble of the Act, included its assumptions and goals that it aims to achieve:

- “For the good of children who need special protection and help from adults, a family environment, an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding, in the interest of their harmonious development and future life independence, to ensure the protection of their rights and freedoms,
- for the good of the family, which is the basic unit of society and the natural environment for development, and the good of all its members, especially children [...]” (Act, 2011, Preamble).

According to the cited Act on supporting the family and the foster care system, the obligation to support families experiencing difficulties in fulfilling caregiving and educational functions, as well as organizing foster care within the scope established by the Act, lies with local government units and government administration bodies. The tasks related to organizing the foster care system have been assigned by the legislator to local government organizational units at the county level. Foster care is a set of people, institutions, and actions aimed at providing temporary care and upbringing to children in cases where their biological parents are unable to provide care and upbringing. The legislator obliges the county – and consequently the organizer of foster care – to engage in “work with the family enabling the child’s return to the family or, when this is impossible, striving for the child’s adoption, and in the case of the impossibility of adoption – care and upbringing in a foster environment” (Act, 2011, art. 33 item 1). This means that all actions concerning placing a child in the foster care system are not intended to permanently remove the child from the family, but only to provide them with current care – i.e., care and upbringing for a period necessary to work with and prepare the natural family to take back the child. Foster care is provided in both family and institutional forms. Placement of a child in a foster family occurs based on a court ruling (Act, 2011, art. 35 item 1), but in cases of urgent necessity – at the request or with the consent of the child’s parents – it is possible to place the child in family foster care based on a contract between the foster family or the operator of a family group home and the starosta (local

government officer) competent for the residence of that family or the location of the family group home (Act, 2011, art. 35 item 2), and after obtaining the consent of the foster parents (Act, 2011, art. 36). “Foster care can be understood as the temporary, but often indefinite, taking over of responsibilities in providing care for someone, most often a child [...]”. This care is associated with ensuring all broadly understood components necessary for proper functioning: material, emotional, cultural needs” (Roguska, 2011, p. 20). Individuals who take a child into their home as a foster family do not legally replace the child’s natural parents, and the child’s situation does not change under the provisions of alimony and inheritance law. The natural parents still have an obligation to provide alimony for the child, and they often also have the right to maintain personal contact with the child – unless the court decides otherwise. The primary goal and task of foster care are to provide the child with temporary care, upbringing, and support, as well as to meet their material, health, educational, cultural-recreational, and especially emotional needs.

According to the Act on supporting the family and the foster care system, “the forms of family foster care are: foster family (kinship, non-professional, professional, including professional performing the functions of emergency family care and professional specialized) and family group home” (Act, 2011, art. 39). Mirosław Jamrożek and Bożena Matyjas define a foster family as a small social group, wherein this family constitutes an educational environment created by people who are not the natural parents of the child (Jamrożek, Matyjas, 2006, pp. 386-389). Meanwhile, Marzena Ruszkowska emphasizes that “a foster family should constitute the same or a very similar caregiving and educational environment for a child as a natural family” (Ruszkowska, 2013, p. 67).

The tasks of a kinship foster family can be performed by grandparents (ancestors) or siblings of the child, whereas a professional foster family or non-professional foster family is formed by spouses or individuals who are not ancestors or siblings of the child. In the case of a non-professional foster family, at least one person forming the family must have a permanent source of income. In a professional foster family or non-professional foster family, no more than three children or individuals who have reached adulthood while in foster care can reside at the same time. “In cases where it is necessary to place siblings in a foster family, with the consent of the foster family and after obtaining a positive opinion from the foster care coordinator, it is permissible to place a larger number of children at the same time” (Act, 2011, art. 53 item 2).

Among professional foster families, we can distinguish specialized professional foster families and professional foster families performing the functions of emergency family care. In a specialized professional foster family (according to art. 59 item 1 of the cited Act), the following are particularly placed: children with a disability certificate or a certificate of significant or moderate disability; children referred to in the Act of June 9, 2022, on supporting and rehabilitating minors; minor mothers with children (Act, 2011, art. 59 item 1). It is important to emphasize that in a specialized professional foster family, children with a disability certificate or a certificate of significant or moderate disability cannot be placed at the same time as children covered by this care based on the Act of June 9, 2022, on supporting and rehabilitating minors. Meanwhile, professional foster families performing emergency family care functions accept a child based on: a court ruling, in cases where the child has been brought by the Police or Border Guard, and at the request of the child's parents or another person in the case referred to in art. 12a of the Act of July 29, 2005, on counteracting violence (Act, 2011, art. 58 item 1). A professional foster family performing emergency family care functions may refuse – in particularly justified cases – to accept a child if there are already three children in the family and if the child brought by the Police or Border Guard is over 10 years old. The legislator assumed that a child placed in this form of foster care should stay there no longer than 4 months, but with the consent of the organizer of family foster care, in particularly justified situations, the child's stay may be extended to 8 months or until the completion of the court proceedings deciding the child's further situation, i.e., "return to the natural family, adoption, or placement in family foster care" (Act, 2011, art. 58 item 4).

Family group homes are also a form of family foster care, forming a large family, which is particularly important in providing care for numerous siblings. "In a family group home, at the same time, no more than 8 children, individuals who have reached adulthood while in foster care, as mentioned in art. 37 sec. 2-4 and 6, and individuals leaving family foster care as minors, as referred to in art. 37 sec. 5 and 6, can reside. 2. In cases where it is necessary to place siblings in a family group home, with the consent of the operator of the family group home and after obtaining a positive opinion from the foster care coordinator, it is permissible to place a larger number of children at the same time" (Act, 2011, art. 61). The family group home is organized by the county or an entity to which the county has delegated the implementation of this task.

According to available statistical data, the number of foster families in 2022 amounted to 35,723, including 22,887 kinship foster families, in which 29,619 children were cared for. There were 10,738 non-professional foster families for 14,333 children, and the number of professional foster families was 2,098, in which 7,027 children were placed. During this period, there were also 787 family group homes for 5,625 children. In total, in family foster care in 2022, there were 56,604 children (Information, 2023, pp. 16-18). Kinship foster families constitute the largest group among forms of family foster care, followed by non-professional foster families, professional foster families, and family group homes. According to statistics from the Central Statistical Office in 2022, “18,409 couples and 17,030 single individuals performed the function of a foster family. Families who took in one child accounted for 72.6%, two children – 18.1%, three – 5.4%, and four or more children – 3.8% of all foster families. Over half of the individuals running foster families were aged 51-70 years. Family group homes were run by 666 couples and 115 single individuals. The majority of individuals (77.8%) performing the function of a family group home were in the age group of 41-60 years” (Central Statistical Office, 2022, p. 1).

Placement of a child in foster care should occur only after the exhaustion of forms of assistance to the family, as addressed in the provisions on supporting the family and the foster care system. An exception to this rule is when the child’s welfare requires immediate provision of foster care. The duration of a child’s stay in foster care is temporary – no longer than until they reach adulthood (18 years old); however, if an individual who has reached adulthood while in foster care is still “studying in school; studying at a university; receiving vocational training with an employer; attending courses, if their completion is consistent with the individual program of independence; or has a certificate of significant or moderate disability, they may stay in a foster family no longer than until the completion of their 25th year of life” (Act, 2011, art. 37 item 2). The duration of a child’s stay in foster care is also conditioned by the nature of the reasons that led to their placement outside the natural family.

Family foster care provides a valuable environment for children deprived of their own family, which is why the caregiving, educational, social, and

socialization aspects of the functioning of family foster care have been frequently addressed by researchers of this environment¹.

Functioning of family foster care – selected aspects

The functioning of family foster care is associated with conditions related to the process of its creation and daily caregiving and educational activities, as well as the possibilities of supporting foster families in the child's socialization process. The basic elements influencing the social functioning of foster families include: fulfilling basic caregiving, educational, and socialization tasks towards children, proper preparation of families, and support in the process of caring for the child.

The tasks of a foster family encompass the full range of caregiving, educational, and socialization activities. Foster parents provide personal care for the child from the day they are factually placed in the family foster care, acquiring rights and responsibilities that they must duly fulfil towards the child, including, “1) representing the child in financial matters related to meeting the child's needs; 2) obtaining information about the child being taken in; 3) contact with the child before their admission to the family; 4) support from the district family assistance centre; 5) financial assistance to partially cover the costs associated with taking in the child” (Wosik-Kawala, Czerniak, Grymuza, Kołodziej, 2011, p. 109). Furthermore, the legislator includes a catalogue of tasks dedicated to foster families and family group homes, which, according to art. 40 of the Act on supporting the family, provide the child with round-the-clock care and upbringing, but above all:

¹ Regarding family forms of foster care, among others, in the works of: U. Kusio. (1998). *Rodzina zastępcza jako środowisko wychowawcze. Studium socjologiczne na przykładzie Lublina*. Lublin: UMCS; L. Winogrodzka. (2007). *Rodziny zastępcze i ich dzieci*. Lublin: UMCS; A. Łuczyński. (2008). *Dzieci w rodzinach zastępczych i dysfunkcjonalnych*. Lublin: KUL; M. Ruskowska. (2013). *Rodzina zastępcza jako środowisko opiekuńczo-wychowawcze*. Warszawa: CRZL; P. Domaradzki, J. Krzyszkowski. (2016). *Wsparcie dziecka w rodzinie i pieczy zastępczej. Ujęcie praktyczne*. Łódź: UŁ; M. Raclaw. (2017). *Zinstrumentalizowane rodzicielstwo. Rodziny zastępcze – między usługą a odruchem serca*. Toruń: Akapit; M. Danecka, A. Kęska, R. Płasek. (2018). *Dylematy pieczy zastępczej*. Warszawa: PAN; A. Regulska. (2018). *Rodzina i piecza zastępcza nad dzieckiem w perspektywie zasady pomocniczości*. Warszawa: UKSW; J. Matejek. (2020). *Rodzinną pieczą zastępczą. Teoretyczne aspekty funkcjonowania rodzin zastępczych*. Kraków: UP; G.G. Gajewska. *Pieczą zastępczą w pandemii w percepcji osób zaangażowanych w jej sprawowanie*, *Horyzonty Wychowania*, 20(53) (2021), p. 4960; A. Skalec-Ruczyńska. (2023). *Proces profesjonalizacji opiekunów zastępczych w Polsce, główni aktorzy i zasoby*. Warszawa: Difin; and others.

- “treat the child in a manner conducive to a sense of dignity and personal worth;
- ensure access to relevant health care services;
- provide education, address developmental and educational deficits;
- foster the development of talents and interests;
- satisfy their emotional, material, developmental, social, and religious needs;
- protect against arbitrary or unlawful interference in the child’s private life;
- enable contact with parents and other close persons, unless the court decides otherwise. The foster family and the operator of the family group home collaborate with the adoption centre, the coordinator of family foster care, and the organizer of family foster care” (Act, 2011, art. 40).

The primary task of family foster care is to provide the child with appropriate conditions for upbringing and social, psychological, physical, cultural development, as well as proper education, development of interests, rest, and organization of free time, adapting all this to the child’s health and capabilities. Caregiving and educational activities in foster care also focus on preparing the child for independent and responsible living and the ability to overcome life’s difficulties. The process of the child’s socialization within the family, which occurs, among other things, through imitating the behaviour of parents (e.g., fulfilling their duties), also becomes highly significant. Similarly, in foster care, socialization activities are conditioned by several factors, including the proper organization of family life, the type of foster family, relationships within the family, the atmosphere, and parental attitudes presented by foster parents. “In every family, to introduce the child to the life in society, it is necessary for parents to adopt appropriate methods and forms of upbringing, but in the environment of a foster family, this process must additionally be directed both towards introducing certain changes in case of inappropriate habits and attitudes, and towards teaching and developing those forms of social functioning that the child has not acquired” (Matejek, 2013, p. 69). Proper fulfilment of functions in foster families (Kusio, 1998; Winogrodzka, 2007; Łuczyński, 2008; Regulaska, 2018; Matejek, 2020) is directly related to the process of upbringing and socialization of the child in the foster family, offering the possibility of compensating for their developmental and educational deficits and ensuring a proper and stable educational environment. In the process of upbringing and socialization, meeting the child’s psychological needs – especially the need for emotional belonging, mutual trust – and establishing a bond with them is also of great importance.

Foster families and family group homes are directed towards orphaned children, children whose parents have had their parental authority limited or suspended, and children in exceptionally difficult situations that prevent the provision of basic care and upbringing due to neglect, lack of proper care for the child, and helplessness in caregiving matters. Other reasons for placing children in foster care include parental addictions (of both parents or of either of them), physical and psychological violence towards family members, neglecting basic parental duties, life incompetence, abandonment of the child, homelessness, and also severe illness preventing care for the child, parents' departure abroad (NIK Report, 2011; Szymańczak, 2016). When a child has reached the age of 13, their placement in a foster family depends on their consent, and for younger children, their opinion should also be considered as far as possible when choosing a family. Children directed to foster families often carry many risk factors, including emotional problems and behavioural disorders. A significant group of these children has experienced serious threats in their family environment, such as violence, conflicts, abuse, and neglect. Transitioning to a new family environment is difficult for a child, especially if they are placed in a non-kinship (professional) family, which can generate strong emotions, such as fear, abandonment, uncertainty, sometimes guilt, and longing for loved ones. It should be noted that the foster family and family group home allow the child to have contact with parents and other close persons, unless the court has decided otherwise. A very important task of the foster environment is also to undertake actions to mitigate the effects of experiencing loss and separation by the child. In fulfilling these tasks, persons providing family foster care are supported by the coordinator of family foster care (Borowiec, 2014; Gebel, 2017; Zmysłowska, 2019), who may have no more than 15 foster families or family group homes under their care (Act 2011, art. 77.1). In 2022, 9,016 children were directed from natural families to family forms of foster care (compared to 8,963 children in 2021). Interestingly, "the age structure of children placed in family care indicates that the most numerous age group is still 7-13 years old (19,591 children), and here an increase should be noted compared to 2021 – 19,529 children. However, there was a decrease in the group of adults in care, in the age group of 18-24 years (9,544 people). In 2021, this group amounted to 10,106 people" (Information, 2023, p. 20).

Considering the social conditions related to the functioning of family foster care, the proper organization and preparation of foster families become of significant importance. The organizer of family foster care is responsible for selecting

candidates and ensuring the appropriate fulfilment of tasks by foster families (Act, 2011, art. 76 item 4). In line with the provisions of the Act, the organizer of family foster care also assesses the situation of the child placed in foster care and in the family group home to determine the child's current family situation and analyse the methods used in working with the child and the family, modifying the child assistance plan, evaluating the child's health status and current needs, and assessing the justification for the child's continued stay in foster care (Act, 2011, art. 128-129).

Placement of a child in family foster care involves meeting both formal requirements for this form of care and a variety of additional factors that affect the process of creating a foster family. The first fundamental element is the proper preparation of candidates for the role of foster parents, for whom the legislator has outlined the following requirements. The function of a foster family may be entrusted to married couples or individuals not in a marital relationship, provided they meet the following conditions: "1) provide assurance of proper foster care; 2) are not and have not been deprived of parental authority, nor is their parental authority limited or suspended; 3) fulfil their alimony obligation – if such an obligation exists for them based on an enforceable title; 4) are not limited in legal capacity; 5) are capable of providing proper care for the child, as confirmed by: a) a medical certificate of health issued by a primary health care physician, as defined by the Act of October 27, 2017, on primary health care (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 2527), and b) an opinion on possessing predispositions and motivation to perform the function of a foster family or to run a family group home, issued by a psychologist who has at least a master's degree in psychology and 2 years of experience in family counselling; 6) reside in the territory of the Republic of Poland, with the provision that in the case of foreigners, their stay is legal; 7) provide appropriate living and housing conditions enabling the child to satisfy their individual needs, including: a) emotional, physical, and social development, b) proper education and development of interests, c) rest and organization of free time; 8) are not listed in the database of the Register of Sex Offenders with restricted access" (Act, 2011, art. 42 item 1). It is worth emphasizing that the task of fulfilling the role of a non-professional or professional foster family and running a family group home may be entrusted to individuals who have not been convicted of an intentional crime. Analysing statistics in terms of preparation for the role of foster parents, we read that "in 2021, 8,876 individuals were trained (in 2020 – 4,826), i.e., candidates for the function of a foster family, for running family group homes or for running family-type

care and educational institutions, as well as existing foster families, operators of family group homes, and directors of family-type care and educational institutions (the previous decrease in training undoubtedly resulted from the prohibition of stationary training due to the COVID-19 epidemic)” (Information, 2022, pp. 22-23).

Foster families and operators of family group homes receive financial support to partially cover the costs of maintaining each placed child (Act, 2011, art. 80-82). The amount of this support depends on factors such as the type of foster family, the child’s health, and the child’s social maladjustment. A foster family provides not only basic care for the child but, most importantly, creates a caregiving and educational environment until the child’s return to their natural family. Therefore, “good coordination of foster care should stand behind foster families, meaning specific institutions that undertake supportive and helpful actions. Therefore, assistance to the child and the family is crucial, especially making every effort to ensure that the child’s welfare is not just a verbal declaration but real concern and care” (Matejek, 2020, p. 142).

Foster parenting – profession or passion for helping?

Analysing the functioning of foster care in the context of either a profession or a passion for helping, we notice elements that fall into both of these categories. Work is a conscious activity that involves effort, an undertaking aimed at achieving set results. From an economic perspective, individuals running professional foster families and family group homes receive compensation for their work, the amount of which the legislator differentiates depending on the type of foster family, qualifications, training, and evaluation (art. 85 of the Act), and it also includes time spent on standby to provide work. According to the Act, families are entitled to 30 calendar days of rest from caregiving per year (Act, 2011, art. 69) – it should be added that this is work performed 7 days a week, 24 hours a day, involving the entire family, responsible, and requiring many special predispositions and competencies. At this stage, the factor of a passion for helping – supporting another human being – emerges, in this case, a child directed to family foster care. Foster parents take on a multitude of challenges, not counting the time and commitment involved in compensating for children’s developmental deficits, health-promoting interventions, and support in leveling the child’s developmental deficits, including addressing educational gaps and fulfilling school obligations. These are also compensatory actions, which

take a preventive-therapeutic form due to disorders in the child's personality development, caused by the dysfunctionality of the biological family. Candidates for professional foster care not only need to complete training and obtain qualifications to perform this function but also continuously develop their professional competencies. Some experts believe that the profession of a foster parent should be professionalized and paid. Agata Skalec-Ruczyńska emphasizes that "professionalization is a possible solution to the crisis in this area and an incentive for new candidates to perform this function. It will also serve to improve the quality of foster care and inter-institutional cooperation within the family support and foster care system" (Skalec-Ruczyńska, 2023, p. 265). Considering the indicated areas and analysing research on the foster care system, we can define foster parenting as a work of passion for the benefit of another human being. A job in which we encounter great empathy, patience, care, commitment, and understanding directed at the child's situation, but at the same time grounded on the basis of legal acts, court decisions, control recommendations, and compliance with the entirety of current care for the child – a job in which the safety and welfare of the child should be the highest value.

Conclusions

Issues concerning the functioning of family foster care occupy an important place in the system of care and social support for children in Poland. However, it is important to remember that to effectively assist the child and family, one must consider the broad context and diverse conditions of foster care, integrated actions, institutional cooperation in this area, and the overall relationship of the child with the environment. "Although in the Polish system foster families are obliged to care for the welfare of the child, in a purely individualistic approach (i.e., the obligation to fulfil specific functions, including the pro-social one), they often have to consider in the caregiving and educational process also the welfare of the biological family to which the child should return in the future" (Danecka, Kęska, Płasek, 2018, p. 199). The undertaken actions are associated with specific work for the child, and the recent amendment to the Act on supporting the family and the foster care system introduced some changes to the system, including higher remuneration for foster families, changes in paternal leave rights, elimination of the income criterion for independent wards, and deinstitutionalization and de-regionalization of family foster care. Foster families will be able to apply

to district family assistance centres, which organize family foster care, not only in their own district but also in others, across the country.

The issues presented regarding family foster care highlight the areas of activity undertaken by foster carers for children placed in their families. Considering the indicated circumstances, it is foster parenting in child care that gains special significance in the context of contemporary family problems, and family foster care becomes – alongside prevention and work with the family – a very important link in the process of supporting the biological family. Moreover, foster parenting, by combining work with a passion for helping, provides care and upbringing for the proper development of the child, and by implementing the established child assistance plan, also prepares them for adult life, demonstrating norms of social functioning.

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