

PROSPECTIVE FOSTER PARENTS' ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE PROVIDED SOCIAL WORKER'S ASSISTANCE

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Abstract

The article introduces the significance of social worker's assistance to prospective foster parents: a case of an X Lithuanian town. The best place for the child development and improvement is the family. For some reasons not all the children are raised in families. Some children have no possibility to live with their biological families, therefore according to the established legislation, they live in foster homes under the supervision of foster parents or are adopted. Children adoption in our country is regulated by different acts of legislation. The activity of the ombudsperson for children's rights is governed by the Law on the Ombudsman for Children Rights Protection of the Republic of Lithuania (2000), Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania (2000), Regulations of organization and management of children guardianship (2002), etc. Research aim is to analyze the social service worker's assistance to the prospective foster parents. The following objectives to reach our goal are presented: to analyze theoretical conception of adoption procedure and enforcement; to discuss the system of the social service workers' assistance to prospective foster parents; to investigate foster parents' approach towards the social service worker's assistance and to reveal the main problems. Research methods: analysis of the scientific literature – scientific analysis of adoption issues. The stages of adoption procedures and the requirements overviewed and analysed are provided; document analysis: documents, acts of legislation, laws and regulations of child adoption regulations are analysed and overviewed; a qualitative study: semi-structured interview, analyzing the foster parents' approach towards the social service workers' assistance; problems and probable solutions are identified. The research results are obtained by content analysis. Adoption is considered as a social process when specific rights and responsibilities are provided to foster parents in order to guarantee the child's safety. The research results reveal that the biggest problems for prospective foster parents are extensively long adoption period, lack of social service workers' assistance and poor knowledge on the available assistance.

Keywords: *social worker, assistance, foster parents.*

Families that foster or adopt children often face various difficulties related to the behaviour of a child, interrelations, material maintenance, lack of knowledge about the development problems of children without parental care, inadequate preparation to accept new member of the family, unrealistic expectations regarding the child, etc. It is obvious, that child guardians and foster parents need constant assistance of qualified specialists, i.e. social workers and the state itself. As only in this way it is possible to perform our duties properly, and at the same time to satisfy and protect child's interests.

Adoption process in the state is regulated by diverse legal acts: Law on the Ombudsman for Children of the Republic of Lithuania (2000), Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania (2000), Regulations of Organising Child Guardianship (2002), etc.

We can state that the lack of specified knowledge and information of adoption specialists, also lack of organizational process management skills, practices and insufficient competence is the obstacle for the provision of successful assistance to the prospective foster parents. As social workers present all the necessary information and assistance to foster parents, therefore due to their professionalism depends whether this required information will reach the prospective foster parents and whether the adoption process will be smooth.

Such scientists as Gončiarova & Tamutienė (2016), Stražinskaitė & Kvieskienė (2015), Radžiūnienė (2012), Giedrimas (2014), Vitkauskas (2010) and other analysed the adoption process. Chandra (2014), Gončiarova and Tamutienė (2016) also wrote about the adoption requirements and stages of this procedure.

The scientific problem in this article is actualized by the following issues: characteristics of the analysed attitude of foster parents towards the assistance provided by the social workers. Do prospective foster parents need the provided kind of assistance?

Aim: empirically analyse the assistance of social workers provided to prospective foster parents.

Tasks of this study: 1. Theoretically justify the practice of social workers' assistance for the prospective foster parents. 2. On the basis of implemented research, provide the attitude of foster parents towards the assistance of social workers and highlight the main problems related to the adoption process.

Research methods. Performing the research the following methods were applied: analysis of scientific literature. Stages of adoption procedure and respective requirements were analysed; analysis of documents – legal acts regulating the child adoption process, laws, review and analysis of documents. Qualitative research – semi-structured interview which reveals the attitude of foster parents towards the provided assistance of social workers, identifying problems and possible solutions. Research results are processed using the content analysis and key findings actual for the article topic are presented.

Theoretical insights of social worker's assistance for the prospective foster parents

Stražinskaitė and Kvieskienė (2015) describe the child guardianship as care, upbringing and education of a child without parental care, who in the manner prescribed by law is entrusted to the natural or legal person. Authors also actualize the creation of proper conditions necessary for comprehensive development and protection of child's personal and property interests. If biological family is incapable of taking care of a child, the responsibility to ensure the child care goes to the state. Researchers highlight the overall importance of the child care process, whereas Gončiarova and Tamutienė (2016) emphasize not only legally assigned new rights and the given responsibility but also child's state of mind in the adoption process as child without parental care still undergoes emotional and behavioural difficulties.

According to Liobikienė and Radvilienė (2009), adoption is a continuous process consisting of a few stages: self-determination; preparation for adoption; adaptation; child upbringing. Obvious, that in the adoption process which must be exercised consistently and orderly, the assistance of adoption specialists and preparatory parenthood trainings are of special importance for prospective foster parents.

Scientists divided guardianship and adoption motives into two groups: 1) Oriented towards satisfaction of needs of guardians or foster parents and their families (in order to ensure support in old age, reduce the fear of loneliness, realize a sense of maternity). 2) Oriented towards satisfaction of child needs (adoption of a child for the child). In this case attitude towards child of guardian and foster parents is more flexible. Their reaction to problems is calmer, they try to help child in various situations, educate a child in a morally right manner, supervise and have in mind child's wishes, fantasy and etc. (Braslauskienė (2002), Liobikienė & Radvilienė (2009), Alifanovienė & Šerytė (2006), Kupfermann (2010).

An important role in the procedure of adoption is dedicated to social workers participating in the primary stage of this process – provision of psychological and social assistance, trainings before the adoption. According to Liobikienė & Radvilienė (2009), families may acquire necessary knowledge and skills required for the preparation to adoption in trainings organised by social service institutions before the adoption procedure. During the trainings foster parents often change their standpoint, attitude and thereby the motivation of the adoption. Families start to better understand needs of the child, accept and focus on child needs. There is a high probability for foster parents who did not participate in the trainings or participated only formally, skin-deep, and who are not properly prepared for the adoption to face deep crisis, failed expectations, disappointment in child and their own abilities in the future. Due to these reasons the role of social workers becomes the guarantee of the successful adoption process which allows seeking for the adaptation of the adopted child in the family and efficiency of the upbringing stages in the family.

According to Neil (2010), the main task of the social worker is not to personalise the conditions of the adoption situation, be able to control the emotions, know the main situation.

Giedrimas (2014) emphasizes the importance of guardian and foster parents' preparatory programme (PRIDE) in Lithuania. This programme in the state was firstly applied in 2008 and its fundamental basis is PRIDE programme, which is created in the United States of America and adapted for Lithuania. PRIDE programme is widely applied in European and Scandinavian states while preparing guardians and foster parents.

This is a standardized harmonized system using which foster parents are selected, evaluated and prepared. Continuous professional assistance is provided to them. The essence of programme versatility is the following: primary attention is devoted to skills that a person willing to guard a child has to acquire.

It is possible to state that the main reasons influencing the desire to adopt a child are related to various social and psychological problems; thereby the role of the social workers in the solution of these problems is also significant. Moreover, the introductory trainings for prospective guardians and foster parents provide many benefits, help to evaluate the abilities properly and prevent from incorrect decision making.

Significant skills of guardians and foster parents reflecting the proper satisfaction of child needs are formulated in the programme. They are: ensuring a safe environment and physical needs, also child development needs and compensation of development difficulties, ensuring child's relation with biological family, helping a child to establish safe and strong

relationships, cooperation while solving child's and family problems. The mentioned five skills are the central axis of introductory trainings, evaluation of guardians or foster parents, provision of continuous assistance (Giedrimas, 2014).

Bloznelienė (2010) states that PRIDE programme seeks to help the family notice it as one unit's strongest sides as children without parental care are characterised by low self-esteem and self-confidence. Due to this reason parents are encouraged to see their own strength as it gives the adopted child additional confidence and higher self-esteem. PRIDE programme encourages knowing and understanding you as a personality (Bloznelienė, 2010). Thus, this is a programme which seeks to eliminate factors (they were mentioned earlier) interfering with qualitative adoption and interpreted as adoption problems.

Attitude of prospective foster parents towards assistance provided to them by social workers. provision of research results

Research methodology. Instrument of the research. The research is based on humanistic-existential theory validating relations with family, important persons for it, whereas the reason of successful social assistance is considered personal features of adoption specialists.

Qualitative research was performed in order to reveal execution of assistance to prospective foster parents provided by social workers as a means ensuring consistent adoption process.

Qualitative research is a means that seeks for systemic individual research in order to understand targeted phenomenon. The research made it possible to reveal the attitude of prospective foster parents towards the assistance provided by social workers. The data is processed by using content analysis method. Content analysis method is the quantitative analysis of the social information content. In the most general sense, content analysis is the technique allowing objective and systemic analysis of the text's peculiarities after which reliable conclusions are made. Analysis is objective if various researchers analysing the same documents come to the same conclusions. Systematic approach prevents from decision of analysing such kind of documents that prove researcher's hypothesis. Performing the research the interview method was applied by using semi standardized questionnaire and providing open questions.

Research sample and status of respondents. General set under observation for the qualitative research were chosen families (persons) who participated or are participating as well as willing to become foster parents in PRIDE programme. Seven respondents were questioned. The research was performed in March of 2017.

The selection of the **qualitative research** was influenced by the following factors: low costs, short period of data collection; relative simplicity of data processing.

Ethics of research. All the informants, prospective foster parents, participated in the quantitative research (interview) voluntarily and were informed about the confidentiality of the received data. During the research there were no outsiders in the premises.

Analysis of research data

Demographic indicators of respondents. In order to analyse the attitude of prospective foster parents towards social workers' assistance in the process of adoption 7 foster parents were questioned. Their demographic data is presented in the first table.

Table 1. Demographic data of the respondents

Age	Gender	Education	Biological children	Foster-children
Aged 33–4	Women – 5	Higher – 7	None – 7	Have – 2
Aged 35–1	Men – 2			None – 5
Aged 37–2				

The data provided shows that mostly women participated in the interview. The vast majority of respondents have acquired higher education.

In order to reveal the approach of the prospective foster parents to social worker's assistance, firstly, the current situation has been evaluated. The families participating in the interview have been asked to identify the factors that encouraged them to adopt a child.

Seeking to clarify the motivation factors for child adoption, the interview revealed what had motivated to become foster parents. During the analysis of the data obtained, the category of **“The motivating factors for self-determination to adopt”** and the three supporting sub-categories: **“Infertility problems, encouraging adoption”**, **“Attempts to give sense to one's life”**, **“Undergone personal experience”** were distinguished.

The first sub-category **“Infertility problems, encouraging adoption”** is verified by the following statements: *“Infertility, desire to experience motherhood, to leave a piece of yourself in this world”*, *“We cannot conceive a child, we want to become parents for a child who needs our love, to give sense to our life”*, *“I cannot have biological children”*, *“I can't conceive a single baby”*. The most common motivation for becoming foster parents was the desire to realize themselves in parenthood when a couple cannot conceive children. Infertility is the most common reason to adopt a child, and the motive is the desire to realize themselves in parenthood. The other group of adoptive parents is characterized by social sensitivity motive.

One of the motives of the interviewed adoptive parents was the desire to give sense to their lives by taking care of a child and helping a child to establish himself and socialize. The second sub-category **“Attempts to give sense to one's life”** made it possible for the interviewees to express the following thoughts: *“Me and my wife, we have figured out that we are ready for parenthood, that we have lots to give to a child, especially to a child that is strongly disadvantaged and destined to receive less - attention, warmth, love. Since we do not care about how a child appears there – whether given birth by us or comes from another family - we have thought that we can provide someone with a better life.”*

Also the informants based their wish to adopt on the undergone past experience. Seeing positive adoption examples within their immediate environment, they become eager to provide help for a child by accepting him to their family. The third subcategory **“Undergone personal experience”** has highlighted the following proving factors: *“I had a classmate, I grew up with him, matured, and I knew for sure that in the future I will guard or even adopt a child”*.

Within the interview the informants were asked about where from they had received the information about the adoption procedure? They were asked to explain who had provided it, and whether the information provided met their expectations. The analysis of the received survey responses enabled to distinguish the category **“Obtaining the information about adoption”** and two supporting sub-categories: **“The Internet”** and **“Other institutions”**.

The interview revealed that all the informants had become interested in adoption themselves. The statement justifying the first sub-category **“The Internet”**: *“I was searching for the information myself. I was reading articles and various websites, looking for feedback*

from the persons who had adopted”, “I found the initial information on the Internet, and only later contacted the relevant authorities”, “the Internet”, “I found the primary info on the Internet, later, following the plan, we attended the PRIDE courses, where we received the most of the information”.

During the survey, the interviewed informants claimed that the assistance provided by social services staff was qualified, nevertheless the support was attained by different institutions. The greatest support was provided by the PRIDE program lecturers. The statements proving the second sub-category **“Other institutions”**: *“I addressed in written Vilnius City Municipality Children’s Rights Division administration. Received an answer by e-mail promptly and at length”, “Foster home informed whom to address”, “The information about the adoption procedure was provided by the program PRIDE lecturers”.*

During the interview with the prospective adoptive parents it was highlighted which specialists provided them with the professional assistance, whether it was qualified, and whether during the adoption procedure they had been advised by social workers, which service offices they had represented.

The first sub-category **“Social workers’ consultation during the adoption procedure”** is supported by evidence statements: *“No, did not consult”, “Social worker did not provide help”, “Social worker did not communicate during the procedure mentioned”, “Nobody had contacted us”.* Analysing the informants’ interviews, it could be stated that social worker did not consult the informants during the adoption procedure. It is obvious that there is a possible assumption that the social worker is not involved in the adoption process.

The statements proving the second sub-category **“Other specialists’ participation in the adoption process”**: *“Employees of “SOS Children’s Village” provided consultations, “the assistance during the process was provided by the PRIDE project lecturers. It was qualified. At the end of the process – by “Žiburys” fund employees”, “The training lead by PRIDE specialists”, “I addressed the Child Right Protection Authority”.* From the data provided, it is evident that the majority of those willing to adopt, participate in the PRIDE program or address other institutions.

During the survey, the informants have expressed their impressions and revealed the problems encountered in preparation for the adoption procedure.

The statements justifying the first sub-category **“Adoption process duration”**: *“We are still on the waiting list, we are provided with minimal information, we know our waiting list number, and that’s it”, “The process took 9 months for us”, “The process could take 4-5 months, but it is artificially extended. Even in the objectives for 2013 it is foreseen to make the process six-months long”, “Everything takes a very long time. It perplexed us when we had to submit a certificate from the clinic, which, as it turned out had not been properly filled in, therefore we had to get back and supplement the certificate. The most outraging is that the certificate was issued in August 2016, the courses commenced in October, the adoption may take place at the end of this year or even next year, that is, everything takes a very long time. And now we are as if in between heaven and earth: we cannot plan neither long journeys, nor child room’s decoration, because it is not clear at all when it will happen. In addition, the municipality of an X town has informed me that should the adoption procedure not reach the court this year, the certificate from the clinic would have to be re-issued all over again – the bureaucracy...”, “During the training, it was said that is was not clear at all how long the process might take.”* While analysing the justifying statements, it is obvious that the informants identify the long adoption process as the biggest problem.

With the formation of the second subcategory “**Lack of information provision**”, the following supporting statements were revealed: *“From the beginning of the process until the end, there was no contact with us. The only contact that we had was an e-mail stating that the documents were received and we had to wait for the training. Never once did we receive a call, a letter or an attempt to get in contact. The contact was always initiated by us”*, *“Lack of communication during the process”*. During the adoption procedure the informants would like that the persons responsible for the adoption would come to help to understand the whole adoption process and would provide all the necessary information about the child.

The third sub-category “**Incompleteness of the adoption process**” has helped the informants to express their views with the supporting statements: *“We submit the documents to one institution, the other provides training, the third gives the child, meanwhile you have get to yet another to get to know the child, others can provide information on the child’s state, all of them do their work, but there are a lot of wandering”*, *“There was no conversation carried out for the initial evaluation”*, *“In mid-February, during a call to inquire about whether we are on the waiting list, it was answered that not as there yet had to be a commission and its findings, and our documents had not been even reviewed, although received. During the call at the beginning of March, it was said that we had been placed on the waiting list on the 1st of February.”*, *“Not transparent waiting list control system. By calling for the first time, we found out that we were 37th on the waiting list if we adopted one child, the third if we adopted two. During a call a week later, we found out that we had moved backwards for one position.”*, *“We were informed that the training had been delayed due to completely unjustified and shameful reasons that have nothing to do with the child’s welfare. The trainers do also need vacation. There were issues regarding the course funding”*. The analysis of the statements provided shows that in order to adopt a child, a lot of problems caused for the informants appear due to the adoption process being incomplete and not transparent.

During the interview the opinion of the prospective adoptive parents was heard out on whether a social worker helped to solve problems during the adoption procedure, what were the issues they had been provided the consultations on?

The statements justifying the first sub-category “**Social worker as an intermediary**”: *“The organization of the contact between foster homes, hospital and the prospective foster parents, assistance with legal aspect decisions and consulting, advice on how to integrate a child into the family, community. The advice on how to communicate with the child’s blood-relatives, if any. Child security assurance”*, *“Could be a mediator, helping to communicate with other institutions”*, *“Could contribute to the successful transfer of the child to the family, to give practical pieces of advice related to the court, possible issues and resolution, perhaps even advise on such basic things like clinic, kindergarten, allowances, etc. (anything related to the child)”*, *“It’s difficult to tell if a social worker is needed. There should be one person to coordinate everything centrally. I.e. the one we would receive all the necessary information, assistance, advice, consultations from”*, *“There should be a person to duly discuss the whole process with”*, *“I do not think a social worker is needed”*. The analysis of the supporting statements might lead to the assumption that the social worker could play a mediating role in dealing with other institutions for the informants. The mediation would include provision of consultation on adoption, assistance in document submission and communicating with the child.

The second sub-category “**Social worker’s participation in the primary process**” provides the following thoughts of the informants: *“The provision of the initial information”*,

“Could tell about the whole adoption process”. The analysis of informants’ answers shows that the informants interviewed need the assistance of the social worker.

At the end of the interview with the prospective foster parents, they were asked what kind of the social worker assistance they would expect in the future, what suggestions they would offer in anticipation of social worker’s assistance during the adoption procedure?

The statements proving the first sub-category “**Consulting**”: “*The contacts for services (where and what you can get, find), consultations on the situations, consultations on the process, to my mind, are necessary*”, “*The social worker is needed to help to cope with the challenges within the adoption procedure*”. Having analysed the thoughts provided, it has become obvious that the social worker could take responsibility during the entire adoption procedure. The informants suggested that the social worker communicated more with Child Rights Protection Service and was more involved in the adoption process.

The statements justifying the second sub-category “**Social worker, responsible for the whole adoption process**”: “*It should be the person responsible for the whole process: the adoption procedures, legal issues, the initial assessment of foster parents (a simple human conversation), consultations in different situations (how to receive legal advice, whether there are free-of-charge psychologists available), post-adoption care*”, “*Could help to mediate with other institutions*”, “*Social workers need to more actively cooperate with Child rights protection service*”, “*Could help to communicate with other institutions*”. Having analysed the informants’ answers, it has become obvious that the assistance of a social worker is required during the process of adoption: would help foster parents to better communicate with other institutions.

The statements justifying the third subcategory “**Social worker as a counsellor?**”: “*You need to be heard out*”, “*All of us need that kind of communication*”. The interviewed families do also require social worker as a counsellor, who would enable speaking up on the adoption issues.

Conclusions

To sum up the survey results, it can be stated that the adoption is a social process, during which the possibilities for adoption are being assessed, foster parents are granted specific rights, responsibilities are being delegated, while the child is prepared for the change, ensuring his safety. During the adoption, foster parents face internal (e.g., frustration, lack of motivation, etc.) and external (e.g., lack of support from the specialists and the state, complicated adoption procedure, the negative attitude of the society, lack of information, etc.) factors. For the realization of children’s rights and the fluent adoption process, it is important to coordinate the adoption proceeding, which has to be carried out by social work professionals.

The study has revealed that social workers involved in the adoption process as the PRIDE program implementers, almost did not participate within the other stages of adoption; foster parents were usually motivated to adopt a child by infertility or the desire to take care of someone; the biggest problems associated with the extended adoption process are incompleteness of the adoption process, not transparent system and insufficient number of consultations aimed at providing information within the adoption process; social worker intervention in the adoption process is necessary to the prospective foster parents in case when there is a need to communicate with other institutions, as well as for the relevance of regular consultations.

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The scientific problem in this article is actualized by the following issues: characteristics of the analysed attitude of foster parents towards the assistance provided by the social workers. Do prospective foster parents need the provided kind of assistance?

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To sum up the survey results, it can be stated that the adoption is a social process, during which the possibilities for adoption are being assessed, foster parents are granted specific rights, responsibilities are being delegated, while the child is prepared for the change, ensuring his safety. During the adoption,

foster parents face internal (e.g., frustration, lack of motivation, etc.) and external (e.g., lack of support from the specialists and the state, complicated adoption procedure, the negative attitude of the society, lack of information, etc.) factors. For the realization of children's rights and the fluent adoption process, it is important to coordinate the adoption proceeding, which has to be carried out by social work professionals.

The study has revealed that social workers involved in the adoption process as the PRIDE program implementers, almost did not participate within the other stages of adoption; foster parents were usually motivated to adopt a child by infertility or the desire to take care of someone; the biggest problems associated with the extended adoption process are incompleteness of the adoption process, not transparent system and insufficient number of consultations aimed at providing information within the adoption process; social worker intervention in the adoption process is necessary to the prospective foster parents in case when there is a need to communicate with other institutions, as well as for the relevance of regular consultations.

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