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Original article

PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL STRESS IN PROFESSIONAL FOSTER CARERS IN GABROVO REGION, BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges in providing foster care services is the psycho-emotional stress that foster parents experience.

The aim of the present study is to explore the risk factors increasing the levels of psycho-emotional stress and burnout in foster carers in the region of Gabrovo.

Materials and methods: The study included 63 professional foster carers from the region of Gabrovo. We used a questionnaire designed by the research team, the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA) and a structured interview. Descriptive statistical methods and nonparametric analysis were conducted with IBM SPSS Statistics Base - v. 25.

Results: The main factors that contributed to the difficulties faced by foster parents in providing care were: the child's length of stay in the foster family; the child's age at the time of placement; the support provided by the state agencies, and ongoing training. Additional factors were the foster parents' income and place of residence, the child's current health and age; foster care being provided by couples.

Conclusion: Foster care needs to be provided in close collaboration between local authorities, state agencies, and foster carers, with continuous psychological support for both foster parents and foster children.

Keywords: foster care, professional foster carers, psycho-emotional stress,

INTRODUCTION

Foster care in Bulgaria is a social service which provides a child placed in foster care with the opportunity to be raised in a family environment [1, 2]. This is a protection measure regulated by the Child Protection Act, used in case the biological family is temporarily or permanently unable to provide sufficient and consistent care for the child. Foster care is an alternative to institutional care, offering a family environment, which is the most important factor for the physical and psychological development of every child.

Foster parents are responsible for children who often come with complex emotional trauma, losses and disappointments. Foster parents bring their values, trauma, and life experiences to the foster family [3, 4, 5]. All of these are preconditions for secondary psycho-emotional stress when providing foster care [6]. Foster parents demonstrate higher levels of stress than biological parents, with stress increasing over time [5].

Vulnerability to secondary traumatic stress is under-researched in foster carers. Relatively little attention is paid to the risk and protective factors and to specialized trauma training [7].

In some studies, the concept of secondary trauma overlaps with secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue, which also includes burnout [8]. Despite the fact that chronic stress and burnout are often considered work-related, they are common in all areas that give people a sense of meaning [9]. It is proven that parenting is both a complex and a stressful activity [10, 11], and as children give meaning to their parents' lives, it is also reasonable to discuss parental burnout [12]. It appears when parental stress severely and chronically overwhelms parents' resources to cope and manifests through four main symptoms: parents feel exhausted and quit their parenting role; they detach emotionally from their children; they gradually lose the pleasure in parenting and their identity as parents [13].

Research in the United Kingdom shows elevated mean values of compassion fatigue and high levels of secondary traumatic stress and burnout among foster carers [14]. It has been established that chronic secondary traumatic stress is directly influenced by burnout and primary trauma, whereas resilience, empathy and self-care are viewed as protective factors [7].

The aim of this study is to explore the risk factors increasing psycho-emotional stress levels and burnout in professional foster carers in Gabrovo Region.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study included 63 professional foster carers from the Gabrovo region (the municipalities of Gabrovo, Tryavna, Sevlievo and Dryanovo) who have agreements for providing the social service 'Foster care'. The following tools were used for the purposes of the study:

- a 29-item questionnaire where the first part examined the interaction of foster parents and the social service providers and the second part focused on the specific problems foster carers faced in the fostering process.

- the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA), consisting of 23 items, provides information using four dimensions: emotional exhaustion, emotional distancing, feelings of being fed up and contrast with the previous parental self.

- a structured interview with four questions about the foster parents' emotional state.

Descriptive statistical methods and nonparametric analysis were conducted with IBM SPSS Statistics Base - v. 25. The study was conducted between Mar 1, 2023 and Apr 30, 2023.

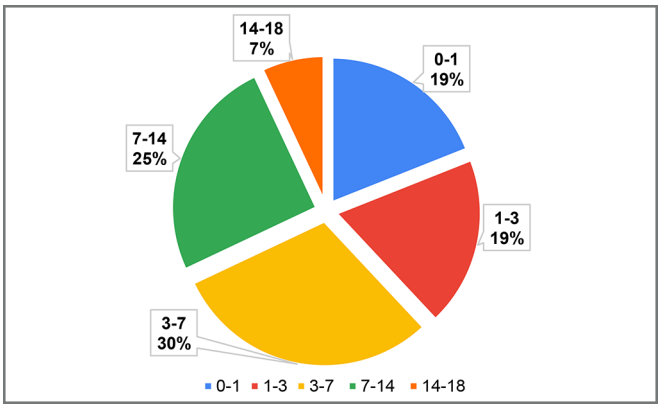
RESULTS

We carried out a survey of 63 professional foster carers from Gabrovo region (the municipalities of Gabrovo: 11, Dryanovo: 23, Sevlievo: 14 and Tryavna: 15). The average age of the foster carers was 57; the highest identified age 62 was in Tryavna municipality and the lowest in Sevlievo municipality: 53. The average age in Gabrovo municipality was 60 and 54 in Dryanovo municipality.

The fostering social service in the Gabrovo region was more often provided by couples (45 married foster carers, i.e. 71.4%) than by single mothers.

From Jan 1, 2012, until Apr 30 2023, in the Region of Gabrovo, foster care was provided to 220 children (45 in Gabrovo municipality, 55 in Dryanovo municipality, 41 in Sevlievo municipality and 79 in Tryavna municipality). The age distribution of children placed in foster care during that period of time is shown in Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Age distribution of children in foster care in Gabrovo region between Jan 1 2012 and Apr 30, 2023.



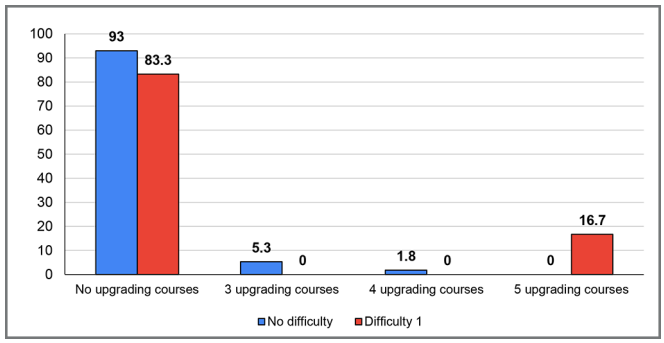
The average length of stay in a foster family in Gabrovo municipality was 3.9 years, in Dryanovo municipality, it was 6.7 years, in Sevlievo municipality, the time was 5.7 years; and in Tryavna municipality, 5.1 years.

The support of the Regional Foster Care Team was important for the quality of foster care and for the prevention of psycho-emotional stress. On a rating scale from 0 to 5, it received a score of 4.76. The two supervisions given annually were considered sufficient by the majority of foster carers. In the municipalities of Gabrovo and Sevlievo, the foster parents noted that they did not need additional courses to upgrade. The biggest number of foster carers interested in upgrading courses was in the municipality of Dryanovo.

The questionnaire included six statements that could be perceived as difficulties and/or challenges influencing the psycho-emotional stress of professional foster carers. Difficulty 1: 'Specific time management and around-the-clock child care commitments' was listed as a leading difficulty by 6 foster parents from the Gabrovo region who were fostering children aged 0-1. A statistically significant difference was identified in the distribution of their opinion regarding the number of annual supervisions. Half of the parents with Difficulty 1 (3 foster carers) stated that two supervisions a year were insufficient; while in the other group, just 15.8% (9 parents) gave that answer (χ^2 4.120, $p<0.05$).

There was a statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding the number of upgrading courses suggested by parents. (χ^2 9.976; $p<0,05$) (Fig. 2)

Fig. 2. Relationship between the number of upgrading courses and Difficulty 1.



The time the child spent in foster care also influenced the distribution of parents as regards Difficulty 1. (χ^2 19.287, $p<0.05$) (Table. 1)

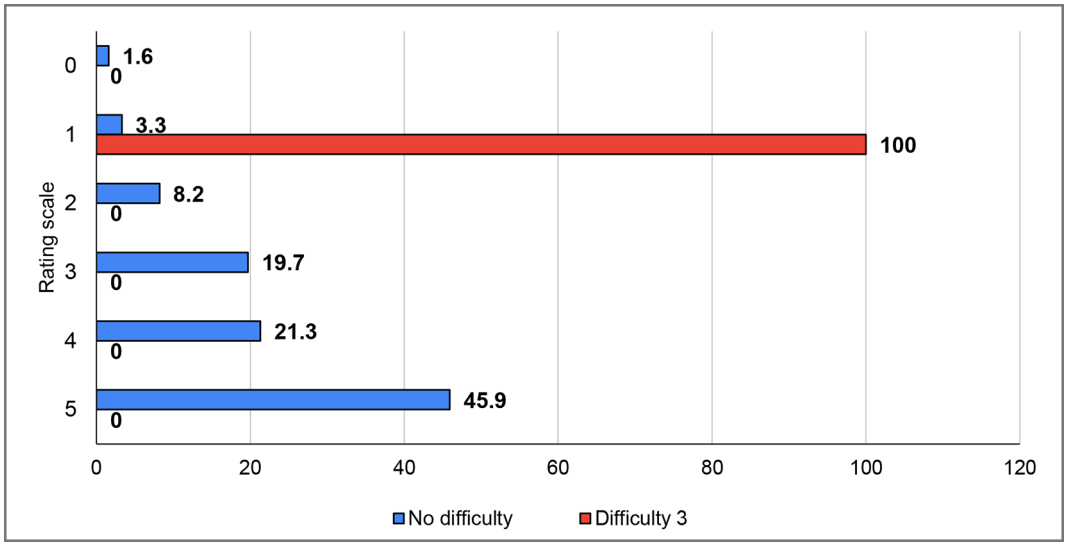
Table. 1. Relationship between the child's length of stay with the foster family and Difficulty 1, Difficulty 3, Difficulty 4 and Difficulty 5.

	Difficulty 1					Difficulty 3					Difficulty 4					Difficulty 5				
	No		Yes		T	No		Yes		Tot	No		Yes		Tot	No		Yes		Tot
	N	%	N	%	N	N	%	N	%	N	N	%	N	%	N	N	%	N	%	N
1 year	16	28	0	0	16	16	26	0	0	16	12	23	4	36	16	8	21	8	32	16
2 years	7	12	0	0	7	7	12	0	0	7	3	5.8	4	36	7	6	16	1	4	7
3 years	12	21	0	0	12	12	20	0	0	12	12	23	0	0	12	5	13	7	28	12
4 years	4	7	1	17	5	3	4.9	2	100	5	5	9.6	0	0	5	4	11	1	4	5
5 years	5	8.8	0	0	5	5	8.2	0	0	5	2	3.8	3	27	5	5	13	0	0	5
6 years	4	7	1	17	5	5	8.2	0	0	5	5	9.6	0	0	5	1	2.6	4	16	5
7 years	3	5.3	3	50	6	6	9.8	0	0	6	6	12	0	0	6	5	13	1	4	6
9 years	4	7	0	0	4	4	6.6	0	0	4	4	7.7	0	0	4	1	2.6	3	12	4
10 years	2	3.5	1	17	3	3	4.9	0	0	3	3	5.8	0	0	3	3	7.9	0	0	3
Total	57	91	6	9.5	63	61	97	2	3.2	63	52	83	11	18	63	38	60	25	40	63

Difficulty 2: 'Emergency situations and tight deadlines' were reported by 9 foster parents. No significant relationships with other factors were identified.

Difficulty 3: 'Lack of interaction with other foster carers' was confirmed by 2 foster parents from Gabrovo region. The rating of the support of the Regional Foster Care Team also impacted the distribution of parents who indicated Difficulty 3. (χ^2 19.287 p<0,05) (Fig. 3)

Fig. 3. Relationship between the rating of the support from the Regional teams and Difficulty 3.



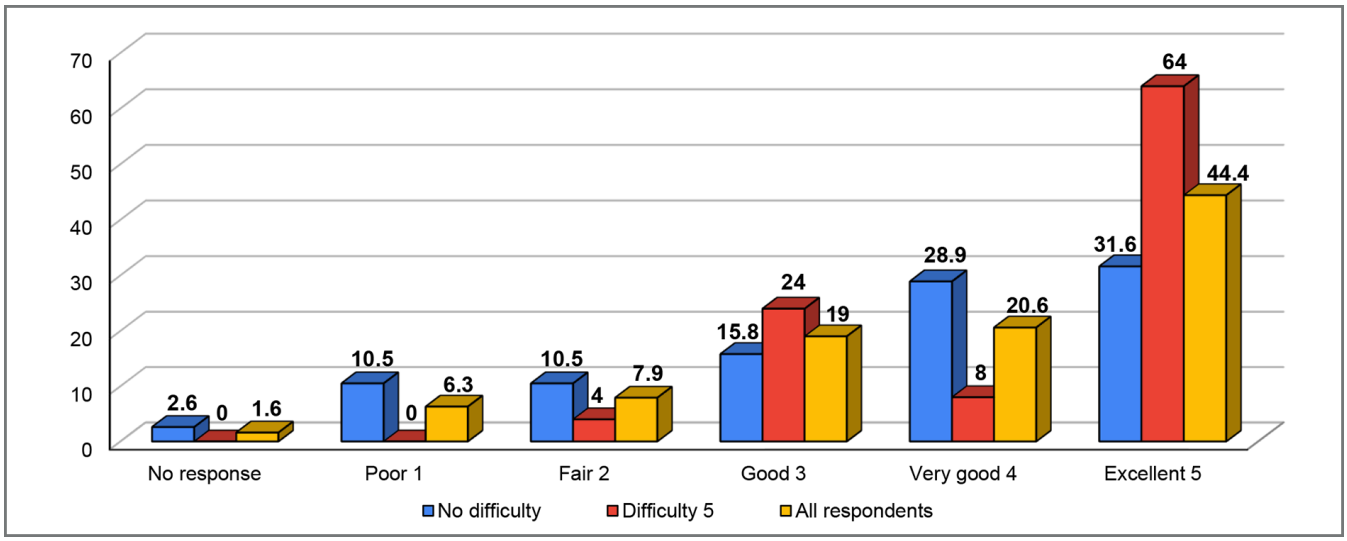
Those who needed interaction with other foster carers had been with the child for 4 years (100%), while the majority of foster parents who didn't report such a need had been with the child for a year (16 carers or 26.2%) (χ^2 23.961 p<0.005) (Table.1)

The foster parents' income and place of residence also influenced their distribution in relation to Difficulty 3: 'Lack of interaction with other foster carers'. The foster carers who indicated Difficulty 3 had the lowest income of up to BGN 850 (χ^2 7.945; p<0.005).

Difficulty 4: 'The endless demands to the care I provide, including the child's specific mental states and behaviours unknown to me' was reported by 11 foster parents from the entire region. It was linked to the duration of the foster care (χ^2 21.962; p<0.05) (Table.1) and whether the foster care service was provided by a single parent or by a couple (χ^2 6.510; p<0.05).

Difficulty 5: 'Emotional attachment' was indicated most often (by 25 foster parents). This difficulty was directly related to the support from the Regional Foster Care Teams (χ^2 11.405; p<0.05) (Fig. 4).

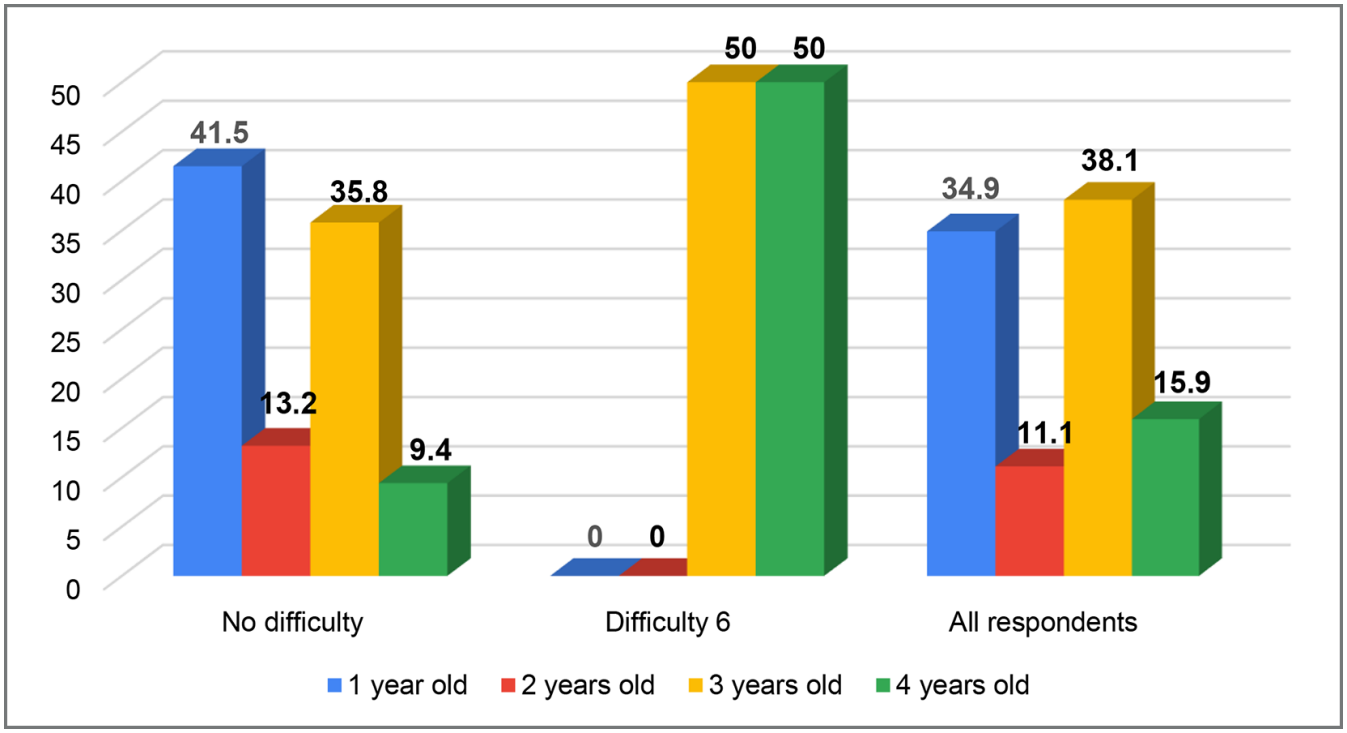
Fig. 4. Relationship between the ratings of the support from the Regional teams and Difficulty 5.



'Emotional attachment' also correlated with the period of foster care (χ^2 19.287; p<0.05), with the child's health (χ^2 6.08; p<0.05), the child's current age (χ^2 34.669; p<0.05), the child's age at the time of placement with the family (χ^2 8.661; p<0.05) and the time since the child's placement with the family (χ^2 17.222; p<0.05) (Table.1)

'Conflicts with the child/child's behaviour problems' (Difficulty 6) were reported by 10 foster parents who fostered children in the age ranges 7-14 and 14-18. The leading relationship here was between Difficulty 6 and the child's age at the time of placement with the family (χ^2 14.636; p<0.005) (Fig. 5)

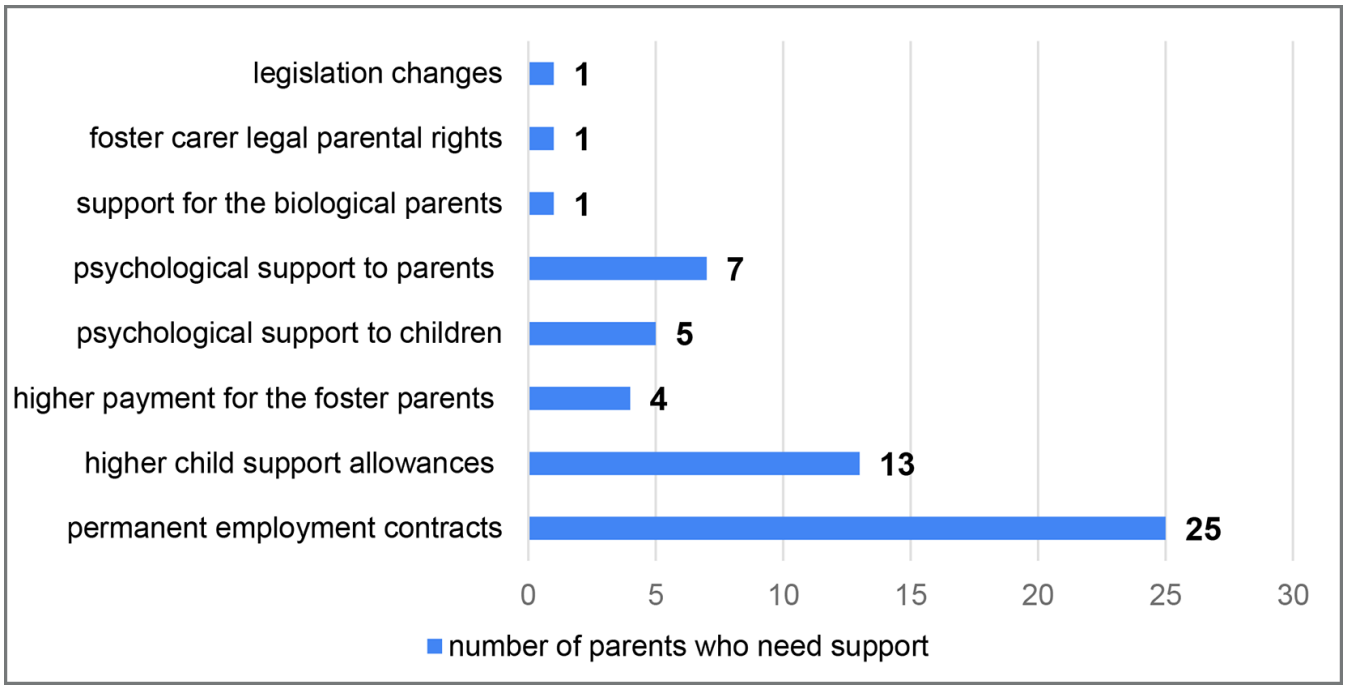
Fig. 5. Relationship between the child's age at the time of placement and Difficulty 6**.**



No burnout was identified in any of the respondents.

The responses of foster carers from the Gabrovo region to the question: 'What type of support that is not available do you most need as a foster parent?' are summarised in Fig.6.

Fig. 6. Type of support needed by professional foster carers.



DISCUSSION

The study has made it clear that the main factors influencing the difficulties experienced by professional foster carers are: the duration of the child's placement in foster care; the child's age at the time of placement; support provided by authorities (Regional Foster Care Teams) and ongoing training. Additional factors are foster carers' income and place of residence; the child's health and current age; provision of foster care by a couple.

The length of the child's placement in foster care influences almost all of the studied fostering difficulties. On the other hand, based on literature data, the number of fostered children, the marital status, age, race and education of the foster carers are statistically significant for the duration of foster care. [15]

The average time of 5 years spent by children in foster care is an indicator of the unclear status of the children using this protection measure. A placement with such a length strengthens the emotional attachment between foster parents and the child, which makes the separation much harder for both sides. On the other hand, the child brings some kind of psychological trauma, and continuous care can provoke compassion fatigue, psycho-emotional stress and other psychological problems in the foster carers.

The highest percentage of children placed in foster care is in the pre-school age and in the age range from 7 to 14. Both age groups have challenges associated with the process of adaptation and school readiness, the start of puberty, and other specifics of neuropsychological development.

In general, the support from authorities and state agencies is a protective factor. What matters here is the nature of support provided by the regional teams, which is upgrading courses and supervisions. They have been assessed as insufficient by some foster carers and have a direct relationship with the following difficulties: specific time management and around-the-clock childcare commitments, lack of interaction with other foster carers and emotional attachment.

According to a qualitative study of support and training needs, foster carers report serious stress and problems mostly associated with foster children's mental health. Therefore, they highlight as their highest priority the need for support and training in mechanisms for managing children's mental health difficulties. [16]

The responses to the question: 'What type of support that is not available do you most need as a foster parent?' have made it clear that the professional foster carers from Gabrovo region would like to work on an employment contract that guarantees security and financial stability when the child leaves the foster family. Another type of support could be higher child support allowances for foster children. Equally important is the psychological support both for foster children and for foster carers

CONCLUSION

The foster care service still faces a lot of challenges. Foster carers are at risk of psycho-emotional stress, the leading factors for which are the lengthy and poorly regulated stay of children in foster care; placing children in foster care at a certain age (risky in itself); the insufficient training especially on specific health issues; the insufficient financial help for foster families.

Foster care is the path towards a lasting solution for the child: reunification, adoption, an independent adult life. Therefore, to fulfil its function, foster care needs to be provided in close collaboration with local authorities, state agencies, and foster carers, along with continuous psychological support for both foster parents and foster children.

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