



# Introduction

During the last decades foster care has become ever more popular to help troubled children who cannot stay in their birth families for whatever reasons. However, several outcome studies have shown that youths placed in foster care do less well than their peers in the general population in several areas of development. For example, foster children often lag behind in reading and math skills, they have school completion rates which are proportionally low and at adult age former foster children often are unemployed, receive public aid or have seriously deviant lifestyles (e.g., homelessness).

Nollan, Pecora, Nurius and Whittaker argue that such long term risks run by foster children are linked to the development of inadequate life skills and try to trace the risk and protective factors influencing the life skills among youth in long-term foster care. They found that protective factors like good relationships with the foster parents, high self-esteem and involvement in social groups were associated with greater self-sufficiency skills, while risk factors like ADHD, special education, many placement changes and abuse and neglect were associated with fewer self-sufficiency skills. This study clearly suggests the importance of finding an adequate match between the foster child and the foster family. For example, if a foster child is hyperactive and impulsive and the foster parents are not fit enough to handle a busy child one can easily understand that things will go wrong. If children and families are not well matched and the stay in the foster family is not well planned by the welfare agencies, the children will run a high risk of being replaced and experience the negative consequences associated with this, like feelings of unsafety and developing a lack of trust in caring adults and the child welfare system.

In addition, Strijker, Zandberg and Van der Meulen argue that we lack an objective and reliable classification system of behaviour and emotional problems of foster children in their foster homes and thus, the necessary notions for treatment planning and supervising. Using cluster analysis, they investigated whether the eight syndromes of the Child Behavior Checklist can be used to label the psychosocial problems of foster children. Four groups were found and these taxa turned out to correspond with the CBCL taxonomy. However, the taxonomies found lacked predictive validity for foster care. This suggests that alternative matching instruments must be developed.

Recent research has shown that many regular approaches used in child welfare often fail to adequately help troubled families with lower socio-economical backgrounds and families with cultural origins differing from the societal mainstream. As an answer to this unwanted phenomenon social work disciplines have recently developed methods for Family Group Conferencing (FGC). Such FGC-approaches are usually based on the idea that, given the resources, the information, and the power, the family itself is the most capable instance to decide for their children safely and appropriately. This implies that professionals such as social workers and doctors must step backwards. Their role is not to decide, but to help the decision-making in the troubled families, by providing information, resources and expertise that will help the family group. Professionals thus get a new crucial role as resource people. One method of FGC was originally developed in New Zealand, and while the legislation of this country uses FGCs essentially mandatory in child protection, other countries permit to refer

families at their own discretion. Knowledge about social workers' attitudes towards the FGC-model is thus paramount to understand the use of FGCs outside New Zealand. Sundell, Vinnerljung and Ryburn investigated the attitudes towards FGC of social workers in Sweden and the United Kingdom, two countries in which the New Zealand model recently has been implemented. Further, they analyzed actual referrals to FGC in both countries. They found that the number of implemented FGCs was almost the same in Sweden and the United Kingdom and reported overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards FGCs in both countries, although only few social workers actually had initiated FGC.

Van As and Janssens discuss aspects of family functioning related to child behavior problems. They focus on parenting styles, intergenerational relationships, family structure and familial interaction patterns. They conclude that the development of child behaviour problems is related to a lack of parent support, unbalanced parent-child relationships, a lack of cohesion and regulation in the family structure, and a poor quality of communication between parents and child. Yet, no firm conclusions can be drawn about the causality of the relationships, as the behavioural problems of the child can also be causative for the adverse functioning of families. It will be the task of future research to unravel circular causative mechanisms contributing to harmful family-child interactions.

Lack of friendships and feelings of loneliness often form additional risk factors threatening children with developmental difficulties. Heiman explores this issue for learning disabled students by comparing their evaluation of friendship qualities with their parents' and teachers' perceptions. He found that learning disabled students reported less loneliness than their parents. On the other hand, parents thought their children had more friends at school than they actually had. Parent and teacher reports on loneliness and the quality of relationships with peers were much more in concordance. The findings underscore the need for both parent and teacher reports in the clinical assessment of social and emotional difficulties in learning disabled children.

*Jan van der Ploeg and Evert Scholte*