

Assessing the relationship between foster children and their families

A tool for research and practice

Teresa Díaz-Tártalo

Instituto CEU de Humanidades Ángel Ayala, Abat Oliba CEU University
Barcelona, Spain

Nuria Fuentes-Peláez

Department of Methods of Research and Diagnosis in Education, University of
Barcelona, Spain

Corresponding author's address: Abat Oliba CEU University Barcelona, Instituto CEU de
Humanidades Ángel Ayala, c/o Mrs. Prof. T. Díaz-Tártalo, Calle Bellesguard 30, 08022
Barcelona, Spain. E-mail address: mttartalo.ihum@ceu.es

Abstract

The objective of the article is to acquire in-depth knowledge of the nature of family relationships in foster placements by using analyses of illustrative cases from the Double Moon test (Greco, 1999). The research focuses on the connections observed between attitudes of non-kinship foster families who facilitate the relationship between the foster children and their biological family, and the perceived well-being of the family relationships. This is a qualitative study based on three instruments: a socio-demographic questionnaire completed by the foster parents and the foster child, two semi-structured interviews, and finally the DM-test. The participants in this study comprised 26 children and 39 foster parents. The study results show that certain attitudes of foster parents can facilitate a child's integration within the foster family and assist with the creation of a calm relationship between the child and the biological family. The study also reveals that in cases where some level of hostility on the part of the foster family towards the child's biological family exists, the child has greater difficulties in adjusting to the foster family and the risk to future disruption increases. Implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: Foster care, early detection, family relationship, double belonging, loyalty conflict.

Introduction

The feeling of ‘double belonging’ (dual feeling of belonging) of children in foster care families is an issue that attracts the attention of research and practitioners. How foster families facilitate the relationship with the child’s biological family is crucial to making continuity possible, to preventing possible future breakdowns, and to detecting elements that could later harm the successful progress of fostering.

Research shows that contacts reduce the feeling of abandonment that these children can experience, contribute to the well-being of children (Hess, 2003), and aid with better adaptation during the placement (Fuentes-Peláez, Amorós, Mateos, Balsells, & Violant, 2013; Hess, 2003). McWey, Acock and Porter (2010) have analysed the impact on a child’s mental health that regular contact with his or her biological mother has. The results indicate that frequent contact is slightly associated with lower depression levels and significantly associated with a considerably lower number of externalising behavioural problems.

Nevertheless, research also shows that contact between fostered children and their biological family is not necessarily positive if it is not worked upon. “We have found out that these contacts could work either as a bomb or a bridge” (Carvalho & Delgado, 2014).

The attitude of foster carers plays an important role in favouring a beneficial relationship with the child. Andersson (2009) places emphasis on the importance of foster carers’ *inclusive attitudes*. Her longitudinal study states how inclusive attitudes exhibited by the foster family towards the child’s birth family promote continuity and a sense of security, also in periods of reunion or re-placement in other foster families, and fa-

ilitate foster children’s hard work in coming to terms with their family background and finding their own way. Fuentes-Peláez et al. (2013) also detected that a complementary and collaborative relationship between the foster family and the biological family gives foster children a sense of relief as well as support during the adaptation process. Baker, Mehta and Chong (2013) showed how good outcomes are in part the result of working with the foster carers in terms of the issue of possible conflicts of loyalty between the child, his or her biological parents, and the foster parents.

Furthermore, Sanchirico and Jablonka (2000), also pointed out that the promotion of contact is a critical element of the foster care system and it is defended for all children, except in cases when it may cause harm. It can therefore be concluded that it is necessary to take into account that contact between the child and the biological parents must be accompanied by adequate support which promotes a benefit for the children.

Leathers (2003) noted that children who had close relationships with both parental ‘poles’ may experience a greater conflict of loyalty. To minimize loyalty conflicts in children who maintain a relationship with their biological parents, the author suggests not reducing contact but instead allowing a professional to intervene in order to assist and reduce conflict.

Additionally, the study made by Neil, Beek and Schofield (2003) revealed that at least one-third of children in foster care are placed in stressful situations in terms of their biological parents’ visits. The same authors emphasize the importance of the existence of empathy and sensitivity in foster carers, which can be of great help to children in building a sense of belonging in both families.

The results obtained in the above-mentioned research suggest the need to continue studying how to contribute to the improvement of the quality of contact and visits of children to their biological families. It takes into consideration the impact that the role of foster carers has in the child's relationship with his/her biological family and as a result, the significant impact that it may have on the child's well-being and on the fostering continuing. Further research is needed focusing on the relevance that foster families can have in allowing children to live a healthy double feeling of belonging versus becoming prisoners to a conflict of loyalty.

Context of study

The study was conducted in the Community of Madrid (Spain) where, in December 2014, 4,077 children were in protective care: 59 of whom were in family foster care and the remaining 41% in residential care. The children in non-related families numbered 691, most of whom were in permanent foster care (N=677). In Madrid, only children who enter the emergency fostering programme can receive temporary foster care (14 families with 28 children).

According to regional managers of foster care services many of the permanent foster carers in the Community of Madrid seem to demonstrate a progressive and unconscious tendency to 'appropriate' the child away from the biological family. Usually, this is not easily detected through the type of habitual approach that practitioners follow. This study therefore endeavoured to detect evidence of family relationships that could be identified as facilitating the 'dual belonging' of the foster child. Also we intended to find indicators of positions of hostility

towards the relationship of children with their families of origin that, according to previous research, benefit from being detected early on in the relationship.

Objectives

The aim of this research is to offer a model of inquiry. In addition to being a useful model for research, it is also designed to determine at what stage it is beneficial to intervene and work with foster families on the child's integration with the aim of facilitating tools to enhance relationships. The specific objectives are:

1. Exploration of the experiences that the children and their foster families have regarding their family relationships and their relationship with the biological family.
2. Identification of factors that favour the well-being of children and those that make it difficult. This analysis will determine which families facilitate, are ambivalent about or hostile to the relationship of the foster children with their biological families.
3. Application of knowledge by offering proposals that can help to improve the experience of family relationships.

Methods

Participants

Study participants were 22 foster families in the Community of Madrid. They were recruited with the help of regional foster care services and an association of foster families (convenience sampling). The sample comprises

39 foster parents with a total of 26 fostered children, with four cases where the families fostered two siblings. The average age of the foster parents was 41.5. Of these 22 families, 13 already had older children at the time of receiving the child included in our study (12 biological children, 1 adopted child). Of the 26 participating children, 10 were girls and 16 were boys. The average age of these children at the start of their foster care was 5.6 years. At the time of the interview, the average time that the children we studied had been in foster care was 4.3 years. Of the 26 children in our sample, 7 were in administrative foster care (i.e., their placement in foster care had the approval of the biological parents) and 19 cases were judicial, either because the parents could not be located to give their consent or because they were dissatisfied with the measure. All the children in the sample, with the exception of three, have gone through the residential care system prior to entering into family foster care.

Instruments

The research presents a multi-instrument model of inquiry that enables direct access to the experiences and perspectives of children and foster carers based on the research of Greco (2001).

The instruments used in the study to collect information are three-fold:

1. A sociodemographic questionnaire divided into three parts: The first part collected information on the foster child. The second part focused on obtaining information that foster carers have about the biological family of the child they are fostering. Finally, the third part asked the foster carers to provide objective information about themselves (such

as age, marital status, time spent cohabitating with their partner, level of studies, work profile, family structure, and previous fostering experience).

2. Two semi-structured interviews that were first conducted with the foster parents and later with the child. These interviews lasted a minimum of 45 minutes. The main areas of the interview focused on motivations for fostering, personal experience of fostering, experience of family relationships and particularly the relationship of the child with the biological family, contact therewith, expectations regarding fostering, and perceived deficits in relationships.
3. Greco's (1999) eponymous graphic projective (drawing) test, named Double Moon Test. It was used in its individual and joint version (foster parents and child drawing together).

Triangulation and an analysis by thematic areas were carried out using all of the collected data. An exploration of the experiences that foster parents and the children have, especially regarding their relationships with the biological family, was conducted.

Double Moon test – The Double Moon test (DM-test) provides professionals with a useful diagnostic tool to identify possible continuity and discontinuity in the perceptions of those who do the test. We have chosen to focus specifically on the outcomes of this instrument which has a proven track record of facilitating better understanding of *family relationships* (Greco, 1999).

The test is useful in gaining information about how those who are immersed in a complex family situation perceive their sense of belonging. It is recommended by the test author as a tool to assess those cases in

which a person feels that he/she belongs simultaneously to two or more family contexts as this could be the origin of a 'conflict of belonging'. This conflict can be between two existing and factual poles, as in the case of foster care, separations and reconstituted or blended families after a divorce, or between two poles of which one can only be present at a symbolic level, such as in the case of adoption. The fact that one of the poles of conflict is not literally present does not diminish the power of what we could call its 'empty presence' (Green, 1998).

The DM-test has to be conducted on three separate occasions: firstly, by the foster parents without the child; secondly, by the child alone, so that the foster parents do not see what the child draws, nor is the child able to see what the foster parents have previously drawn; and finally, by the child and the foster parents doing the drawing together.

The application of the DM-test enables the detection of whether any distortion exists between the drawings done individually and those done by the foster parents and child together. As a result, it is possible to obtain information about the type of interactions that take place between all parties involved in fostering. It allows assessment beyond the product (the drawing) and the process, and enables assessment of the family, what it does together and how. Further instructions can be found in the *Appendix*. Below (see next page) is an example of a (harmonious) drawing that we may find after having given all the instructions of the DM-test to a child.

The last question in the test allows the inclusion in the exploration of what might be termed the *ideal dimension*, covering what the interviewee *would like to see happening*. The question permits the interviewer to in-

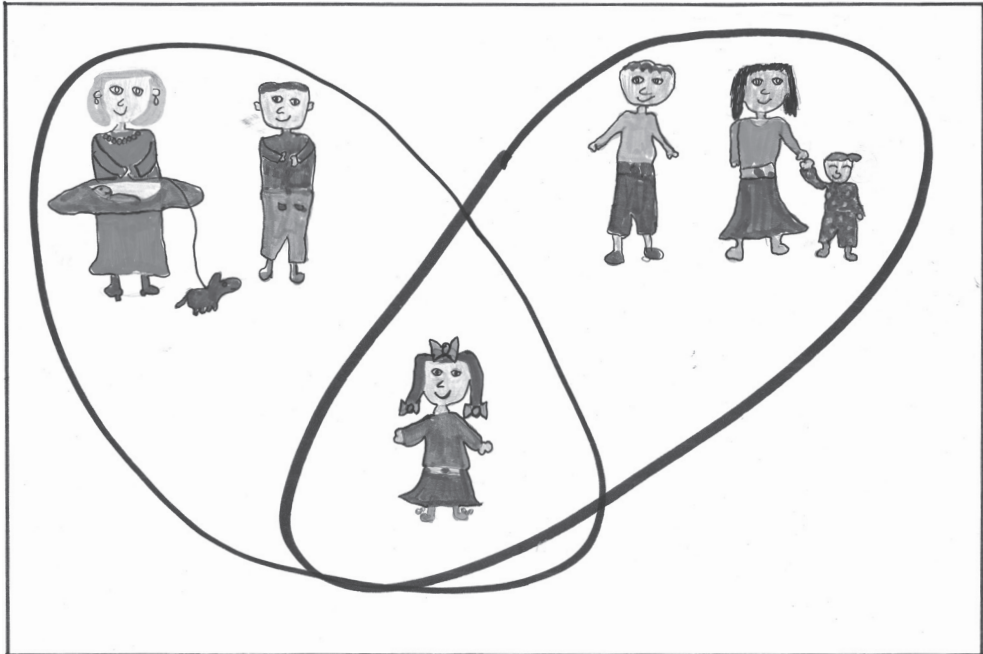
quire about all aspects that can arise related to the ideal expectations of the person. It is interesting to observe how often – when responding to this last question – many respondents are able to give an answer at a verbal level but do not make a graphic representation of what they express verbally. It seems as if they do not give credit or real space to what they really want. Also, they often refrain from using the wand (which is the tool to create the ideal situation – see Appendix). This fact can be a sign of either an inability to give space to this desired dimension, or indicative of an attitude of resignation to the current situation and the inability to believe in the possibility of an improved reality, or scepticism on the part of the child. Context and triangulation with the other instruments of inquiry allow the most appropriate interpretations.

After applying the test separately, the foster parents and the foster child are invited to do the drawing together. This is known as the 'joint-version'. This study has endeavoured to detect whether there is any contradiction between the individual designs and the joint drawings, allowing to raise hypotheses on the type of interactions that occur between all those involved in the foster care.

When the joint application of the test is carried out, the instructions are again delivered to the participants in the same way (Greco, 1999). The application of this projective graphic test has procured 74 drawings for analysis.

Analysis

The results, in addition to the concrete graphic production, include analysis of all verbal expressions made whilst doing the test as well as a study of the notes taken



Drawing 1. Example of a drawing by an individual child

during the test performance including observations of body language and the affection and expression perceived at the time of all drawings. For further details of these analyses the authors can be consulted.

Results

Through analysis of the data it has been possible to detect key aspects of fostering: those that can limit its performance, increase the risk of discomfort or discontinuity as well as those that can enhance and support fostering through increasing the wellbeing of all involved. We have put together the most relevant results in two sections, referring to (a) barriers and (b) facilitators regarding the communication between the foster child, the biological

family, and the foster family, including the relationships concerned.

Communication barriers

Included among factors that hamper the positive development of relationships between members of the birth and foster family, and can therefore jeopardize positive progress of the fostering process, the following has been found: a) an emerging desire to have fuller parental rights on the part of the foster parents, b) negative experience of the visits, given that the foster parents believe that children suffer when they have contact with their biological parents, and c) a lack of information regarding the child's history.

Nineteen out of 22 foster carers emphasized that adoption is relevant in their histories, or in the discernment process. Most ex-

press this openly, but others do not. Nevertheless, it seems logical to conclude that they have a hidden motivation to adopt even if they do not express it openly (in view of their age, their inability to have biological children or the path they follow until they opt for foster care). When this motivation is associated with appropriate feelings towards the child, it gives rise to foster carers' behaviour against the child having a relationship with the biological family. This is not only the case for families without children. This study has found that there are foster parents with other children (biological, fostered or adopted) who are also reluctant to accept the relationship of the child with his/her biological family. As an example, below is the response of a foster parent who has another son (biological) younger than the fostered child. The foster parent said:

"...in the moment that the family foster care begins, I believe that the visits and contact of the child with the biological family will finish. Because I believe that if they continue seeing their biological parents, while they are living with a new family, then the child would become crazy, I think that this isn't good for him!" [foster father – case 1]

A mismatch between the child's experience of their relationship with their biological family and what their foster parents believe of this experience is observed: in 18 cases, foster parents express that children suffer because of the visits, but children do not claim to experience said suffering. Foster parents believe that the children need to reduce contact with their biological family. But on the contrary, children mainly express to be satisfied with the fact that there is a relationship or, otherwise, to feel discomfort in cases where there is no relationship.

The results obtained following an analysis of the DM-test, show that where there are hostile attitudes in family relationships, these must be addressed to prevent maladjustment that could lead to a breakdown in the relationship between the child and the foster parents.

A first example is case 1 which relates to a nine-year-old child who had stopped visits with his biological family because these visits were deemed to be harmful to him. The foster family reported that the child, who has been with them for four years and who was placed with the foster family at the age of five, "...no longer asks about his biological family." When talking with these foster parents it was found that they did not want to refer to the possible presence of any biological family that the child may have; they rejected the subject as a conversation topic. They stated that a desire to adopt was gradually taking shape in a clear way, although it had not been an initial motivation of theirs for fostering. However, at the time of the interview, these parents expressed a clear desire for the child to be their own. This issue is closely related to the difficulty that these foster carers expressed in terms of giving space to the biological family issue of their foster child. Moreover, this difficulty did not make it any easier for the child to approach the issue with freedom or ease. The child was unable to express his feelings about the subject either verbally or at the graphic level and his foster parents did not want to hear anything about his biological parents.

"I don't want to ask about my mother." [foster child – case 1]

When asking these foster carers if it seemed to them that the absence of a relationship with the biological parents influenced the

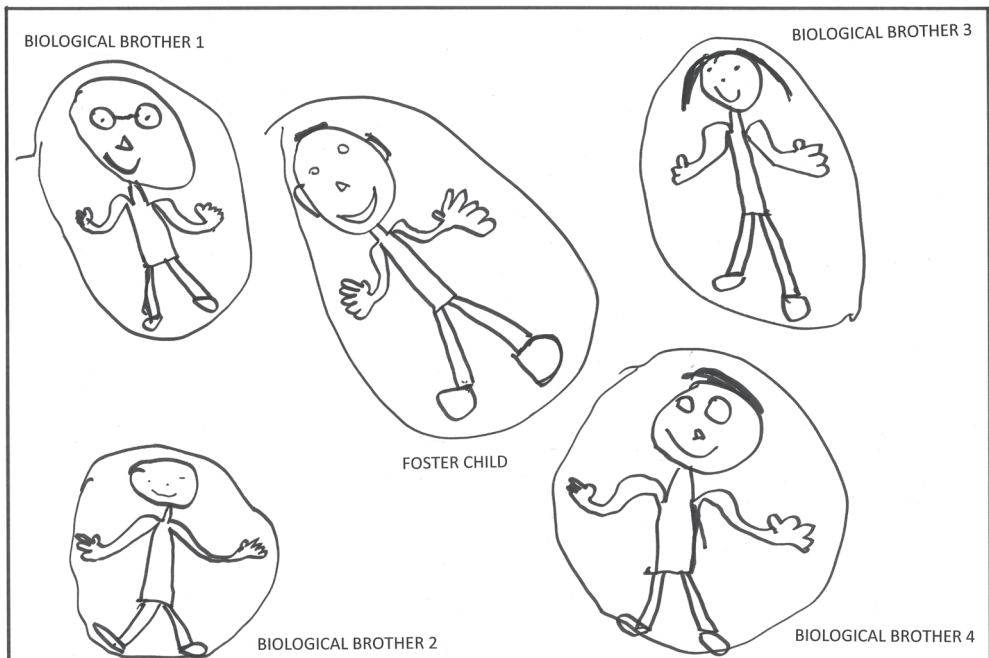
child in some way, the foster father made the following comment:

“The truth is that the child already ... doesn’t ask. I believe that he has already made up his mind about this and no questions are asked, and I don’t think that he needs anything right now. In the future, he will need it for sure, but not now...” [foster father – case 1]

During the graphic test, the child expressed that his biological brothers, with whom he had contact although they are all in the protection system, are very important to him. It could be detected that they were very present at a symbolic level (they were very significant for him, he talked about them spontaneously, he said that he thinks a lot about them) and, in fact, the child ex-

pressed the desire to see them more often, and if possible, daily.

This child drew himself in the middle of the sheet and when he was invited to draw people who were important to him, he only spontaneously drew his brothers, giving further explanation of details concerning all of them (see drawing 2). Both the foster carers and the biological parents were only drawn after the interviewer’s question. Regarding the foster parents, he said *“Here, inside”* (inside the rectangle, where ‘important people’ for him can be placed) but actually he did not draw them. With regards to the biological parents he said *“Outside ...”*, but he did not draw them either. In fact, when it came to circling those who, according to him, were part of the same family, he solved the question by circling each of the brothers but leaving himself initially with-



Drawing 2. Case 1. Individual design of the foster child (when he draws alone).

out any circle. When asked if he was part of any family, only then did he surround himself with another independent circle.

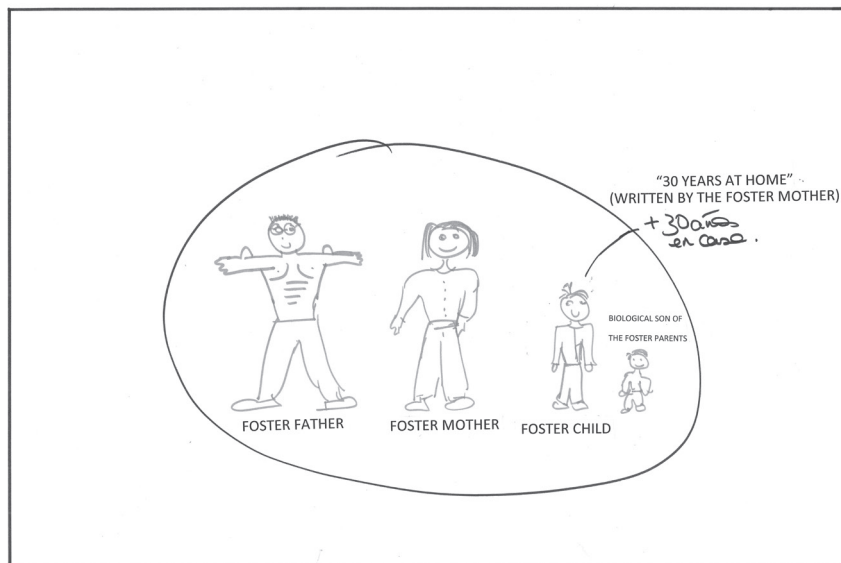
When finishing the test, he did not want to make use of ‘the magic wand’ (see Appendix). Thus, the first drawing (when he performed the test alone) showed him in the centre. The other figures are his biological brothers, some fostered in other families and some living in the residential care system. He made a circle for each one and not a global circle around all the figures and drew neither his foster nor biological parents. He did not draw anyone from his foster family. Everything was drawn in black.

Conversely, when the child carried out the joint drawing in the company of his foster parents, he omitted drawing his brothers who had had leading role in his previous individual drawing (drawn when not in the presence of his foster parents). This time,

when asked to draw the people he considered important, these brothers did not appear. The only figure that the child drew in that picture was himself. It is an exponent of the so-called *protective distortion* with which the child alters his drawing done alone so as not to displease his foster parents, who in this case, would not have welcomed the appearance of the biological family in the child’s drawing. The fact that the child did not draw his biological brothers when he was in the presence of his foster parents, yet whom he had drawn previously in the first picture, shows his lack of expressive freedom with his foster carers. He positioned himself in the upper left corner and drew nothing else.

His foster parents also drew themselves: the foster mother in the middle and the foster father on the right. The mother also drew her other son (biological and younger

BIOLOGICAL PARENTS 



Drawing 3. Case 1. Individual design of the foster parents (when they drew alone).

than the fostered one) and encompassed all of the figures in a dark blue circle, while the nine-year-old boy drew a circle for each figure in light blue. The biological family did not appear and nothing was mentioned about them. No one used the magic wand graphically.

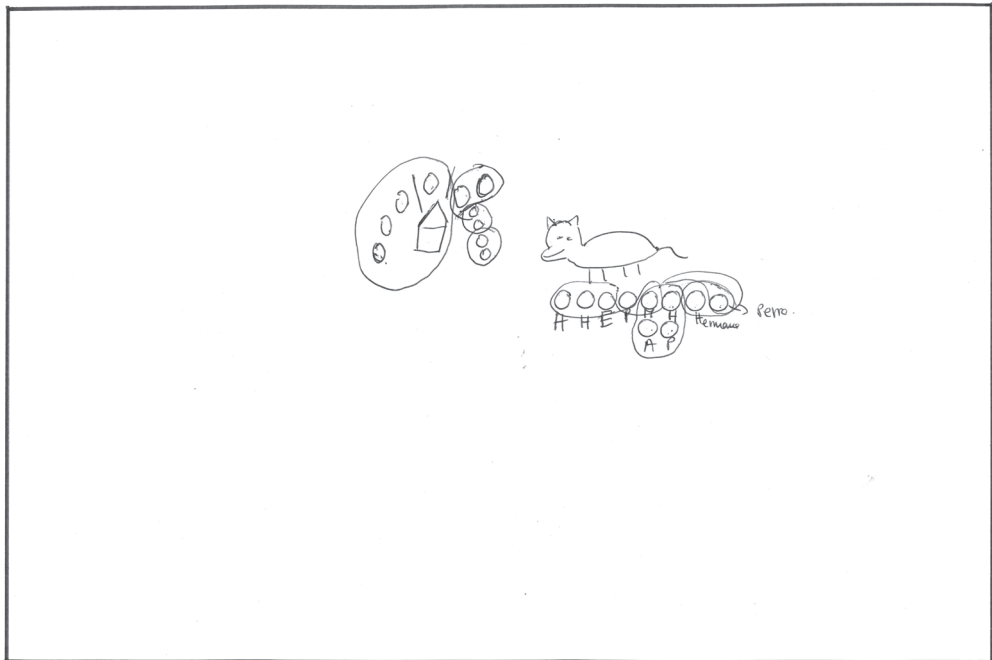
When the foster parents carried out the test alone, without the presence of the child, they showed a lack of inhibition when they expressed that they would like their child to never see his biological parents again. This was exhibited by the fact that the biological parents were drawn by the foster parents only when expressly requested to do so by the interviewer (see drawing 2), and that is why they were drawn in a corner of the page to be later crossed out when

they were offered to make use of the magic wand.

A second example of hostile foster parents is case 2, a couple who fostered an eight-year-old girl. She was placed in their family at the age of four, after two years of residential care. The foster mother expressed the following in the interview:

“If it were not for the visits she would be totally convinced that she is our biological daughter. I see it that way. I, as a mother, would like that, I mean..., I do not know how to tell you, but somewhat selfishly, I wish she had no relationship with them. The thing is – and I am telling you this honestly – that although she considers us

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Drawing 4. Case 2. Individual design of the foster parents (when they drew alone).

to be her parents, well you know, the link that she has with her biological parents is always there. Then I would like, I don't know ..., let's see, well if the girl has been taken away by the Community of Madrid it is because they have not been able to do things well, right? Yet, they still have the right to see her,... I don't know, I do not agree with this! And why does it have to be this way? Because it is the law. But come on..." [foster mother – case 2]

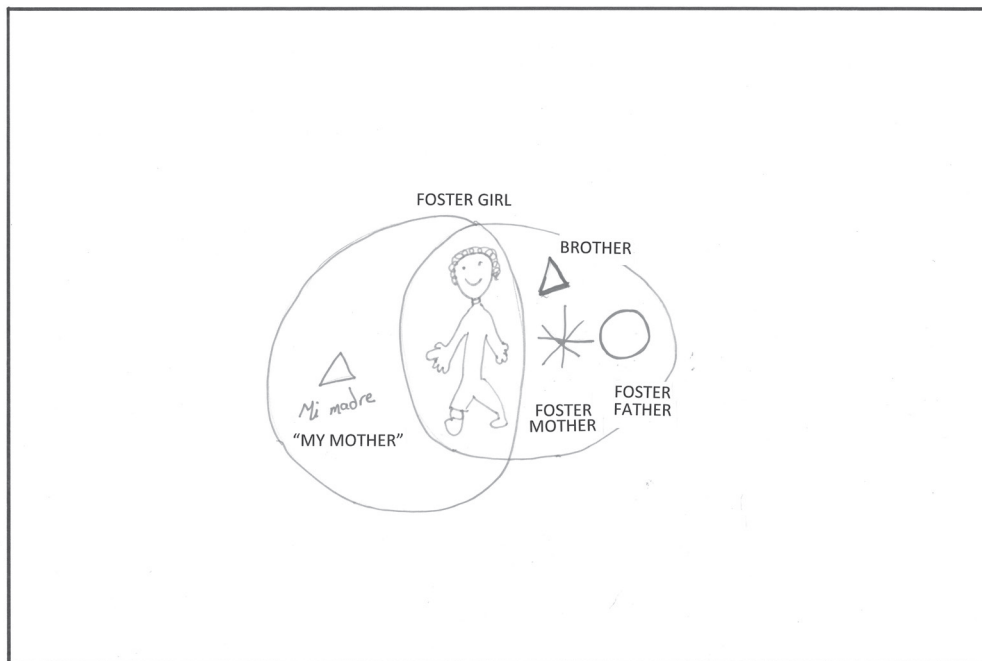
In this drawing (see drawing 4) the biological parents have again been drawn then and crossed out: in this case the foster parents even asked the interviewer if they could turn the paper over to draw them on the other side.

Finally, case 3. This is the case of a 14 year-old-girl who began living with her foster

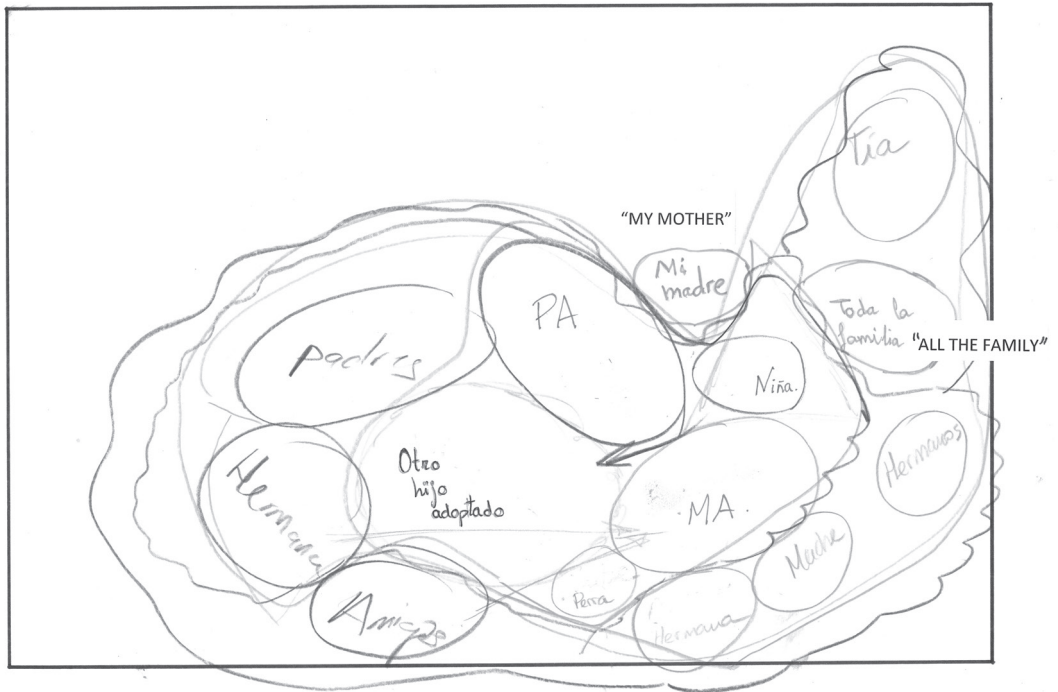
family when she was 11. She drew the following picture (see drawing 5).

The girl is the figure in the middle, where her two families join. On the left side she wrote "my mother", referring to her biological mother and on the right side we can see the first letters of the words 'madre' (mother) and 'padre' (father) referring to her foster mother and father. She uses different colours.

When drawing in the presence of her foster parents it was noted from her body language and non-verbal communication that depicting her biological mother was done with great difficulty. She shed tears as she drew (her foster parents did not observe this as they were sat on the same side as her while she drew). The girl saw how her foster parents moved the marker-pen in order to intentionally leave the biological mother



Drawing 5. Case 3. Individual picture of the foster girl (when she drew alone).



Drawing 6. Case 3. Drawing by foster parents and foster daughter (drawing together)

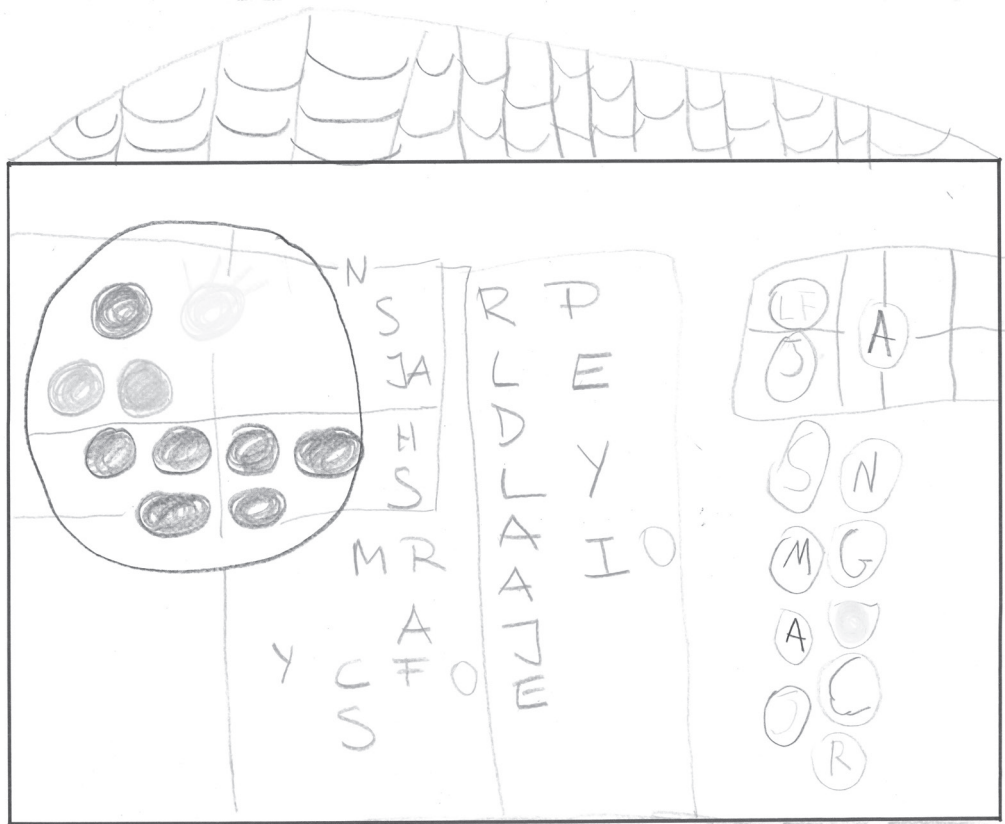
out of the family circle when asked to encircle those they felt are part of the same family. Thus it can be interpreted that the tears were an expression of the pain felt by the girl; yet the foster parents were not aware of her pain.

With great effort, the girl drew her biological mother in green and in the middle of the drawing “Mi madre”, (“my mother”). Later on, the foster parents left the child’s words representing her biological mother out of all the circles.

It is important to note that a clear majority of foster carers from the sample (all except three) said something positive regarding contact between the foster child and the biological family.

Communication facilitators

Factors have been identified that can be considered to facilitate good family relationships and open communication. There are three that are of note: a) the absence of a desire to adopt and the presence of a sole motivation to facilitate a co-parental relationship; b) the relationship with foster care associations to facilitate a supportive atmosphere in terms of the presence (real and symbolic) of the biological family; and c) the ability of foster parents to recognise positive aspects in the existence of contact between the child and the biological family. This study has also identified examples with the DM-test of a healthy method of dealing with foster children and their relationship with the biological family.



Drawing 7. Case 4. Joint drawing: foster father and foster child

Case 4 relates to an 11-year-old child who was placed with a foster family when he was five years old (he has therefore lived with another foster family for six years). During the joint drawing, the foster carer and the foster child drew a house where they all, including the child's biological family, appear under the same roof (see drawing 7).

This foster child when drawing with the magic wand said:

"That's my mother Gemma and my father Pedro, they would also live with me." [foster child – case 4]

But correcting himself the next second continued saying:

"Well, no! They can stay where they are, but let's keep seeing each other." [foster child – case 4]

It is an example of how children are able to recognize that they love their parents even though it is not always convenient that they live together. The foster parent gave many examples that evidenced his understanding of the appropriateness of having biological parents present in the emotional horizon of this foster child:

“In my opinion, it is very important that the foster child can maintain contact with his biological parents, because they are his parents, okay? Although I am his father too, and I feel that I am his father and the child feels that I am his ‘father’, but the biological parents are part of the child’s life, so I think it’s important that they stay there.”
[foster father – case 4]

Another interesting example of how to facilitate the role of foster parents is the case of a five-year-old child, already fostered when he was only two years old. These parents have other children, older than the fostered child and when they drew with the fostered child, they helped him to include the biological mother with the foster family, making some green connection arrows, expressing that they wanted the presence of the biological mother near to the child because this is better for him. They drew different circles around the whole family, including the biological mother.

Discussion

The role that foster carers play in the way in which children experience their relationship with their biological family is associated with the child’s adjustment during foster care (Andersson, 2009; Fuentes-Peláez et al., 2013; Hess, 2003) but remains to be further developed.

This study uses a tool, the DM-test, which provides knowledge of these dynamics and could help professionals and foster carers to detect many aspects that usually go unnoticed and can give rise to problems at a later date if not addressed at an early stage.

The usefulness of our multi-instrument approach lies in the fact that it facilitates the explicitness of some individual and family aspects. Were one to rely on verbal tools only, these results would be attained after a much longer time and in a more difficult way (Greco & Iafrate, 2001). It also allows access to the issue of ‘loss’ or ‘absence’, an aspect of great relevance that is undoubtedly present in the lives of children in foster care, making them modify their representations of what is called ‘family boundaries’ and provoking in them a restructuring of the relational and affective field.

From these results, the importance arises of detecting barriers as early as possible in order to promote the wellbeing of children and open the communication with their biological family inside the foster family. We have noticed how important it is for the well-being of these children to be able to enjoy an adequate relationship with their biological family. To attain this, the role of the foster family is essential (Andersson, 2009; Baker et al., 2013; Fuentes-Peláez, et al. 2013; Wilson et al. 2003). But as Wilson and Sinclair (2004) indicate, it is very important to attend to the risk of contact: all those involved can suffer stressful events (Wilson, Sinclair, & Gibb, 2000) and the role of professionals to facilitate the interaction between all of them is decisive. Tools such as the DM-test can provide valuable information that can be of considerable use in preventing possible risks associated with contact. With this test, personal experiences of all involved can be accessed.

The results show that even though foster parents may not particularly show any resistance to allowing contact between foster children and their biological siblings, they may project some hostility as far as contact with the biological parents is concerned.

The role played by professionals in reducing feelings of rivalry that foster parents tend to display when feeling threatened by the biological parent is of great benefit to the children. Moreover, when children perceive resistance from their foster parents towards their biological parents, their drawings clearly show they experience difficulty in expressing and conveying their emotional ties to their biological siblings when their foster parents are present.

It cannot be understated just how important it is for foster parents to have inclusive attitudes towards the child's biological parents as a way of promoting continuity of foster care in addition to facilitating a healthy life experience for the child. If, as Hecce et al. (2003) say, inclusive attitudes from the foster family towards the child's biological family promote a sense of security, it becomes vital to help foster parents understand that they cannot be hostile towards their child's attachment to their biological parents and should actively encourage the possibility of communicating about it.

The interventions described by Sanchirico and Jablonka (2000) or Balsells et al. (2015) propose, in addition to facilitating the return of these children to their biological families, contact between birth parents and their children. This creates an opportunity to increase children's well-being while in foster care due to the often cited feeling of having been abandoned by their biological parents.

The study's sample has found a general desire of children to increase or have contact with their biological family and many enjoy the visits with their parents. On the other hand, the study has also found that a high proportion of foster parents believe that children suffer when in contact with

their biological family. Previous studies state that contact between birth parents and their children are in themselves an opportunity to increase children's well-being (Cantos, Gries, & Slis, 1997; Hess, 1987; Palmer, 1996). In light of these discrepancies, it would appear there is a necessity to better facilitate reducing the stress that foster carers experience associated with the visits or the relationship of their foster child with their biological families.

It is also important to note the link between the foster carer's having a desire to adopt or aspirations that the child belong to them in a legal sense and reluctant behaviour towards the biological family. There are foster parents who start out with a desire to adopt and later become facilitators of the bond because they have been able to recognize the positive aspects of the child having contact with his/her biological family. This finding has led to propose to practitioners that they provide adequate support to these families to enable them to move towards opening communication regarding the biological family and positive co-parenting.

Furthermore, and according to results from permanent foster care, many foster parents tend to develop a tendency of reluctance in accepting the relationship of the child with their biological families. It would thus seem logical to provide greater support and to improve follow-up to help them overcome these perceptions and fears. At the same time research indicates that some foster carers perceive positive results from the children's contacts with their biological family and how these facilitate biographical continuity for the children in allowing them to have better knowledge of their origins as well as giving them a realistic understanding of their situation (Jimenez et al., 2010).

Both the findings and the tools used in this research may help professionals detect and help foster carers to tackle issues before they become a problem or a risk to the children's wellbeing and the continuity of fostering. The tools used allow children to express themselves and this contributes to reducing distance by achieving one of the key challenges in child protection identified by Balsells, Fuentes-Peláez and Pastor (2017).

The project has other connotations for further research, such as the application of

these tools to the biological parents with the aim of accessing their point of view regarding fostering. It would also be necessary to access the vision that professionals have and to make a comparison with other samples. Finally, the study will continue with the longitudinal monitoring of the families of the current sample in order to contrast with the findings of this study and to assess whether the results have been useful in contributing to a better development of family relationships.

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Appendix

Instruction DM-test

When carrying out the test, either with the parents or with the child hosted separately, parents are shown a piece of white cardboard measuring 50 by 30 cm. with a rectangle in its centre and provided with a large number of coloured markers. The implementation of the test begins with the following explanation from the interviewer who addresses the person performing it, while showing the sheet (cf. Greco, 1999):

“This rectangle represents your world (indicating the outer edge of the inner rectangle), that is, what you are interested in and the people who are important to you. The outer space of the rectangle (indicating the part of the cardboard that is outside the rectangle) is everything that is outside this world.”

After this first explanation, the interviewer gives five successive, individualised instructions to the interviewee – in case of the child as the respondent – according to the age of the child. With the first instruction the respondent (child) is told the following:

“Draw yourself and stand wherever you want.”

With the second instruction, the respondent (child) is told:

“Now draw the people that are important for you, and place them wherever you want. People that you think are important may be near or far away at this moment. They may not be here or not be with you, but if they

are still important to you, you can place them wherever you want.”

The third instruction is:

“Now, circle those people that, according to you, are part of the same family. You can use one or more circles depending on how real they are for you.”

In the case where significant persons such as the foster or biological parents are missing, the interviewer will ask about the ‘absent pole’, saying:

“According to you, where could X be placed?” (where X is the important person that we see missing, whether it regards the ‘biological pole’ or the ‘fostering pole’).

If the interviewer feels there is too much pressure or stress in relation to this topic, one only asks the following question:

“According to you, is someone missing in this drawing?”

Finally, the interviewer introduces the last step, saying:

“If you had a magic wand, would you change anything about the drawing? Is there any person you have not put in and want to add? Is there any person you would like to be in some other position? Who? Where would you like to place him or her? The wand gives you the possibility to change reality: use it as you wish.”