

# “And then I realised I can’t do it anymore”

## Foster care breakdown perspectives of foster children and foster parents in German-speaking Switzerland

**Clara Bombach**

School of Social Work, Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland

**Thomas Gabriel**

School of Social Work, Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland

**Renate Stohler**

School of Social Work, Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland

**Karin Werner**

School of Social Work, Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland

Corresponding author’s address: Institute of Childhood, Youth and Family, c/o Mrs. R. Stohler, Lic. Phil., lecturer and project leader, Pfingstweidstrasse 96, CH-8037 Zurich, Switzerland. Email: [renate.stohler@zhaw.ch](mailto:renate.stohler@zhaw.ch)

### Abstract

With the aim of gathering new knowledge about the complex processes that lead to the breakdown of foster care placements, an international research team explored the reasons for the unplanned termination of these placements in Germany, England, and Switzerland. The Project ‘Foster Care Placement Breakdown’ (2014-2017) was a cooperation between the Universities of Siegen and London and the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, School of Social Work (lead), financed by the Jacobs Foundation. In this article, we present the findings from the Swiss subproject, focusing on the experiences and definitions of foster children and foster parents, exploring how foster children and foster parents experience and explain placement breakdown processes. We explore key topics and influences based on interviews with foster children (n=13) and foster parents (n=20). These qualitative, semi-structured interviews were carried out in German-speaking Switzerland. The data evaluation involved a combination of hermeneutic and content-analysis processes. The results show that foster care placement breakdown processes are always complex, subject to the influence of multiple factors, and cannot be reduced to isolated causes. What emerges clearly in the research, however, is that one experience common to foster children who have gone through a breakdown in foster care is the feeling

of no longer belonging to the foster family from a particular point in time. From the perspective of the foster parents, it is possible to reconstruct different conditional constellations (e.g. stresses and burdens on foster parents or a lack of willingness of schools to support the foster child) associated with the process of foster care placement breakdown. The results provide important insights for the supervision of foster care placements and the management of placement breakdown processes.

**Keywords:** foster care, placement breakdown, disruption, discontinuity, placement change, perspective of foster children, perspective of foster parents

## Introduction

The unexpected termination of foster care placements, referred to as placement breakdowns or placement changes (Bombach, Stohler, & Gabriel, 2018a), are a reality in foster care. Various attempts have been made to determine how often breakdowns arise among children and adolescents in foster care placements. Reviews of factors relating to foster care breakdown have found that there is a variation of between 20% and 50% in the rate of breakdown or placement change across different studies and countries (Christiansen, Havik, & Anderssen, 2010; Oosterman, Schuengel, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007; Rock, Michelson, Thomson, & Day, 2013).

With a view to gaining insights into ways of improving the stability of foster care placements, research has been carried out in recent decades on the causes of such breakdowns, albeit from a predominantly one dimensional perspective (Bombach et al., 2018a; Rock et al., 2013). These predominantly quantitative studies identify reasons for the breakdown of foster care placements, referring to a wide range of factors and influences relating to breakdowns associated with different actors: the foster children, their birth families, the foster par-

ents, and the foster care system (Rock et al., 2013; Van Santen, 2017). The status of the research in relation to the individual factors is unclear. However, across all studies, age is a determining factor: the older the child at the time of placement, the greater the risk of a breakdown and placements in adolescence are seen as particularly risky (ibid.). Behavioural problems on the part of the foster child also increase the risk of foster care breakdown (Van Santen, 2017). These findings can be explained, among other things, by the fact that the associated predominantly quantitative studies are often biased towards the analysis of case files, which reflect the perspective of foster care professionals on the course and termination of the foster care placements. Although the available studies identify a large number of individual factors that increase or decrease the risk of foster care placement breakdown, these factors are seldom contextualized and it remains unclear how they interact.

With notable exceptions (e.g. Khoo & Skoog, 2014; Rostill-Brookes, Larkin, Toms, & Churchman, 2011; Unrau, 2007; Unrau & Day, 2010), the experience of placement breakdown processes from the perspective of foster children and foster parents has not been the subject of sus-

tained academic attention. Accordingly, there is little awareness of the fact that foster children often initiate the breakdown process themselves (with their own justifications), by for example organizing the termination of a placement, seeking follow-up solutions, and moving out. Little or nothing is known about their motivations and how they describe their experiences. Foster children experience breakdowns as a sense of loss on different levels (e.g., loss of power over personal destiny, loss of friends and siblings, and the loss of personal belongings), with long-term personal consequences (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). Foster care placement breakdown can be experienced as a shock and can trigger negative emotions (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2013). There are also indications that foster children who experience placement breakdowns do not feel that they are adequately informed and supported by the responsible experts (ibid.). Many former foster children do not describe their experiences as a 'breakdown' or 'disruption' but place these processes in a broader context and refer to the fact that they felt they did not belong and felt 'unwanted' by the foster families (Rostill-Brookes et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2008).

The few qualitative studies that consider the perspective of the foster parents on placement breakdowns indicate that foster parents terminate placements because the behaviour of the foster child is too great a burden on them and their birth children (Khoo & Skoog, 2014), or because the foster child is perceived as a safety risk (Brown & Bednar, 2006; Gilbertson & Barber, 2003). Other reasons presented are that the foster parents cannot meet the needs of the foster child, the development of health problems by the foster parents, and changes in the

circumstances of the foster family (Brown & Bednar, 2006).

In relation to the placement breakdowns they have experienced, foster parents also refer to a lack of information about the child (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; Khoo & Skoog, 2014) and inadequate support – or no support at all – from the responsible experts during the placement and after the breakdown (Gilbertson & Barber, 2003; Khoo & Skoog, 2014; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2013). Further studies show that foster parents describe placement breakdowns as a highly emotional and difficult experience. They believe that they have failed and feel guilty; their birth children and other foster children in their care can also suffer from the experience of a breakdown (Khoo & Skoog, 2014; Rostill-Brookes et al., 2013).

## Studying foster care placement breakdown in Switzerland

An international research team from the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, School of Social Work in Switzerland, the University of Siegen in Germany, and the University of London, England, conducted a study entitled 'Foster Care Placement Breakdown'<sup>1</sup> (2014-2017). The aim of the study was to identify possible reasons for the breakdown of foster care placements in childhood and adolescence in England, Ger-

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- 1 Detailed information about the ongoing research project can be found at: <https://www.zhaw.ch/en/socialwork/research/kindheit-jugend-und-familie/kinder-und-jugendhilfe/foster-care-placement-breakdown/> [24.01.2018]

many, and Switzerland. The first task of the study was to define its parameters in ways that make sense in the relevant policy and cultural contexts.

With reference to Backe-Hansen (2010), in our study placement breakdown “is not considered as the ‘antithesis of stability’ or a moment when everything falls apart” (ibid.: p. 240) but as a “process that takes place over time characterised by multiple contributing factors” (Egelund & Vitus, 2009, p. 46). The assessment of a placement breakdown process is dependent on one’s perspective and experience (Bombach et al., 2018a)

In this article we present selected findings from the subproject being carried out in Switzerland. The focus of this article is on how foster children and parents in German-speaking Switzerland explain the breakdown of foster care placements. Based on interviews with foster children and parents, central topics and factors from the perspective of these actors are identified and explained. Based on these data, we formulate ideas on the supervision and support of foster care placements and breakdown processes.

## Methods

### Research design

The study uses a qualitative, multi-level analysis, following the conceptual framework of the GOETE project (Walther, 2009, 2012). This approach attempts to explain the interaction between individual subjects and social configurations at higher levels. In other words, it focuses on the qualitative dimensions of the relationships between

micro-, meso-, and macro-levels to understand the process of foster care placement breakdown. The method triangulates perspectives with a special interest in the interactions between:

- the individual level (foster child, foster parents and other involved actors)
- social milieus (families, peers and others)
- institutions (administrative bodies)
- national systems (welfare state, child care, legal regulations, cultural understanding of growing up, and others).

The data on the interactions between all levels were used to reconstruct the meaning and significance of ‘connection points’. The known characteristics previously described will be used to generate ‘theoretical sensitivity’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 41) to discover new dimensions of interaction.

As part of this theoretical framework and methodological approach, we carried out qualitative, semi-structured interviews with foster children and foster parents in German-speaking Switzerland who had experienced foster care placement breakdown. At the beginning of the semi-structured interviews the foster children and foster parents were requested to describe in detail the foster care placement breakdown that they had experienced. The narratives covered the situation prior to the placement, the period with the foster family, the period of placement breakdown, and the situation thereafter. We recorded, transcribed, and carried out a qualitative analysis of the transcripts.

## Field access and sample

For reasons of data protection and privacy, we recruited foster children and foster parents independently of each other. The foster children and foster parents were all informed about the project by flyers aimed at each group. The flyers were distributed using different channels, e.g. specialist units, schools, and social networks. Foster children and foster parents who wanted to participate in the study then contacted the project team directly via telephone, e-mail, SMS, or WhatsApp.

Between 2015 and 2016 we surveyed 13 foster children between 14 and 32 years of age, ten of whom were female and three male. Apart from two exceptions, at the time of the interviews, all of the informants were at least 16 years old. Prior to placement breakdown, the interviewed foster children had lived with their foster families for periods ranging from two to 16 years. Ten of the 13 foster children were adolescents (between 15 and 18 years) at the time of the placement breakdown. The elapsed time between the placement breakdown and the interview varied between three months and 16 years.

Over the same period we interviewed 20 foster parents – 13 foster mothers, 4 foster fathers and three couples who had experienced a placement breakdown with a foster child. The placement breakdown processes described by the foster parents related to 20 foster children: twelve girls and eight boys who had lived with the foster parents for periods ranging from one to 17 years. In ten of the twenty cases, the placement breakdown occurred after five or more years of foster care. At the time of the interviews, the placement breakdowns experienced by

the foster parents had occurred between one and 15 years previously.

## Results

In what follows, we present central aspects of breakdown processes from the perspective of the interviewed foster children. Emerging from the interviews we have chosen to highlight notions of belonging as central. We subsequently provide an overview of the various conditional factors that play a role in breakdown processes from the perspective of the foster parents.

### Breakdown processes from the perspective of foster children

The interviewed foster children experienced the breakdown processes in different ways.

What they share, however, is the experience of 'not belonging anymore', the feeling that they were no longer or, indeed, never part of the foster family. From the perspective of the foster children, the experience of not belonging plays a key role in explaining breakdown processes. In what follows, we explore some common experiences of 'not belonging' and some coping strategies that emerged in the interviews.

### ***Not treated in the same way as biological children***

The examples provided here reflect everyday situations in which the foster children had the impression that they were treated differently from other members of the foster family. Concretely, this was evidenced in the choice of the gifts given to them, the

imposition of rules that did not appear to apply to others, and the fulfilment of wishes that parents expressed for other children but not for them. Two of the young women also experienced disadvantageous treatment on a spatial level; there was simply no (longer) any room for them in the foster family's home:

*"All of my siblings [the birth children and other foster children in the foster family] had their own room and a rather big one at that. And I had a kind of cupboard where you [...] keep cleaning materials or something. [...] There was just room for a bed there and that was all. That already shows you are not equal."*

*"And the [foster parent's daughter] came back to us again and was given my room. [...] And I had to sleep in my foster parents' bedroom then."*

One young man experienced spatial exclusion in a particularly dramatic way: he had to eat at a separate table and was no longer allowed to sit with the family at the shared dining table. In other words, he was excluded from a fundamental mechanism for creating a sense of belonging, the shared consumption of meals, and his belonging to the family was thus undermined to the maximum possible extent.

### **The feeling of being unwanted**

As also emerged in a previous study (Ros-till-Brookes et al., 2011, p. 111), many situations were described in the interviews in which the foster children had the impression that they were no longer wanted or desired. This was the case when family members, e.g. the foster parents' birth children, clearly indicated that they did not like the foster child:

*"So my foster sister really doesn't like me. She also thinks that I am destroying the family [...]. I don't know either. Maybe it's jealousy, maybe she is just against me, I really don't know."*

This was also the case when changes arose in the family constellation, for example due to the arrival of new foster children or the return of a foster parent's adult child to the family home. In one case, the foster mother's biological daughter had an intimate relationship with the foster son. The couple split up and the girl had a new boyfriend. In such situations, foster children expected that the foster parents would stand by them as permanent members of the family, would behave accordingly:

*"I actually hoped that she [the foster mother] would believe me [...], I really felt I had been replaced."*

If this expectation of being supported and treated accordingly is not the case, it can lead to a point which the foster children described in the interviews:

*"I knew then that I no longer belong there."  
"Yes, it started a year earlier. I [...] came to a foster family, I was the only one and then with time a younger [foster child] joined us. [...] And they looked after the little one [...] and nobody was interested any more in how I [...] was doing at school, whether my grades were good, whether I really had got the apprenticeship and so on. [...] And at some point it started with 'Oh, we forgot to call you for dinner, sorry!'"*

All of the interviewed foster children expressed the desire to fit in with the foster family, to belong and to feel a connection

in their everyday lives. Some of them described their expectations of life in a foster family as wanting to be able to live in a 'normal family', to belong to it and become part of it. One young woman asked her guardian<sup>2</sup> to be placed with a foster family for this very reason and accepted that this meant she could no longer live with her own siblings. But she also experienced unequal treatment, felt excluded and overlooked, had conflicts with the foster parents, and was eventually told by the foster parents that she should not return home after school. The exclusion from the family marked the escalation of an extended period of conflict that continued to preoccupy and weigh heavily on the young woman even years after the placement breakdown. Hence the placement breakdown not only involved a rift with the family members; the foster child's original expectation of growing up in a 'real and good family' was also unfulfilled.

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- 2 On the role and function of the *Beistand* [guardian] in the Swiss child and adult protection system, particularly in the foster care services: the deputy accepts a mandate "that can involve advice, consultation, representation and occasional checks and usually carries it out for a relatively long period of time" (Heck, 2015, p. 94). The tasks for which the deputy is responsible vary, depending on whether the placement is voluntary or was ordered by the child and adult protection authority; the professional background of deputies can also differ according to the background of the placement. The deputy is basically responsible for ensuring the well-being of the child, and maintains personal contact with the child, obtains an overview of the situation, advises, mediates, keeps written records, and interacts with other professionals who are involved in the supervision of the foster care placement (Heck, 2015, p. 94).

One young woman reported that from the start of her placement with a foster family she had the feeling that she would never be able to fit in there until she reached the point at which the 'situation' was no longer 'bearable':

*"Yes, a kind of bad relationship just developed [...]. The situation was simply no longer bearable for me and I had to get away from there, so I wanted to get away."*

Other foster children reported that they reached a point in their foster care placements where they no longer felt 'at home':

*"You also have to say honestly that if you do not feel at home in a foster family, there is something wrong. [...] I almost never felt at home at the beginning, but then it got worse and worse. In the beginning it was okay but then. So the foster children have to want it ... and they must feel at home with them [the foster families]."*

The establishment of a feeling of belonging to the foster family group was described in the interviews as a process that did not always succeed. According to foster children's accounts of their experiences, the fact that these processes require time and support appears to be particularly important in their overall experience. The question must be explored as to when and to what extent complex and dynamic living conditions can be planned at the beginning of foster care placement and if future developments can be effectively predicted. In concordance with Geertz (1987), Reimer demonstrated that culture is constantly subject to new interpretations and meanings, is never objective, and emerges in the everyday actions of people (Reimer, 2015, p. 66). Culture,

as a “jointly developed system of meanings” (ibid.), does not necessarily have to be accessible from outside. With regard to foster children placed with a foster family this means that: “When a child comes to a new family, it must [...] learn to know and understand its culture. [...] The child must learn to interpret and understand the family’s symbols and at the same time manage the partial loss of relationships, habits, and familiar environment.” (ibid., p. 68).

### **Coping strategies**

The interviewed foster children described how they adopted different strategies when they did not succeed in managing foster care jointly with the foster parents. In all cases, the adolescent foster children started by observing their new situation, collected evidence in relation to their feelings of being unwanted and not belonging, and only approached their guardians at a late stage in the placement breakdown process. The foster children seldom felt that their accounts of the events were believed. They reported reproaches and allegations which indicated to them that their needs were not being taken seriously. Some of them retreated at that point, meaning that they hardly ever left their rooms and tried to cope with the situation alone, behaviour that could constitute an additional source of stress:

*“Yes, it’s just when you are so unwanted and notice it and you simply cannot speak with anybody [...], you feel so excluded and everything, like the fifth wheel, that is, I don’t know, not so easy psychologically.”*

Other children actively avoided contact with the foster family by using various strategies. For example, by coming home as late as possible in the evening to keep the en-

counters with members of the foster family to a minimum and by staying overnight or on weekends with friends or relatives.

All of the foster children felt alone in their situation, and if there was anyone they could speak to, they were people outside the foster care system who discussed the situation with them and listened to them, or actively tried to find a solution for them. The adolescent foster children reported that they actively networked with others, sought support outside the care system, and proposed potential solutions to their guardians. For example, one young woman told her best friend about the enduring difficulties with her foster family and about her desire to get away from it, a possibility that her guardian had repeatedly rejected. The friend, in turn, discussed her friend’s situation with her own parents and this family expressed its willingness to allow her to come and live with them.

When the stresses of placement breakdown became excessive and the resources to alleviate them were not forthcoming, the options for dealing with the situation were so limited that some of the foster children decided to act up and make themselves heard by the foster care system by behaving, as one young man described it, in a particularly ‘stupid’ way. Apart from verbal aggression and drug consumption, such behaviour included the forging of signatures, equipping themselves with weapons, and repeatedly disappearing. These actions inevitably provoked a rapid response on the part of the foster care system. However in two cases, these behaviours elicited placement moves, which were perceived as punitive, and the adoption of a follow-up solution over which the young people in question had absolutely no control. For one young man, it involved a spell in psychiatric care despite the fact



that he had been pursuing a different objective. Although the adoption of 'stupid' behaviour showed how the foster children could reclaim some autonomy of action, it also emerged from our interviews that this did not enable any planning or the deliberate pursuit of objectives, as the reaction of the care system remained an open question, or resulted in a continued failure to explore the needs of the young people and the motivations for their behaviour.

### **Breakdown of the processes from the perspective of foster parents**

The foster parents identified the factors behind placement breakdown processes as originating with the foster child, the birth parents, experts from the foster care system, and the foster parent(s) themselves. Some of these factors are presented below, based on summaries of the examples provided in the interviews. It should be noted that the corresponding factors never lead to a placement breakdown in isolation and are always interdependent and interactive. Accordingly, the foster parents interviewed never explain the placement breakdown caused only by the behaviour of the foster child.

#### ***Match not optimal from the outset***

In some cases, the foster parents experienced the foster care placement as very challenging from the outset and they were thinking repeatedly about the possibility of termination: for example, when the foster child's behaviour was very challenging, the child had an extensive need for affection, and caring for the child required more time and energy than originally expected by the foster parents, or presented

a particular challenge. The foster parents described these situations as very stressful, particularly when their own children or other foster children were affected and reacted to the new situation by withdrawing from interaction with the newly placed child. In such situations, the foster parents were concerned that the other children in the family were receiving too little attention or that the burden was too great for the family as a whole.

*"She [the foster child] had such a strong presence and she could change the mood dramatically. You felt a little as though you were being pressed against the wall by the child. It became very oppressive and you had the feeling that you could no longer breathe."*

In some cases, the foster parents reported that the placement was arranged very quickly and they had received very little information about the child. In others, the foster family already had regular contact with the child in advance of the placement as a contact family, and believed that they knew the child well enough and were very well prepared for the placement.

When such issues and difficulties regarding the foster placement existed from the outset, foster parents described that, knowing that difficulties could be expected at the beginning of a placement, they repeatedly set themselves new deadlines to continue with the placement and then decided to continue with the placement 'despite everything' on several occasions because they felt an obligation to the foster child, themselves, or others. In one such case, a situation went on for over five years until it escalated and the foster parents finally gave notice that they wished to termi-

nate the foster care agreement. Only a few foster parents, who perceived match-related difficulties from the outset, decided to terminate the placement within a year because they assessed the burden on them as excessive or had developed health problems.

### **Development of the foster child's autonomy in adolescence**

Ten out of the 20 foster children, on whose foster care placements the foster parents reported, were between 14 and 18 years at the time of the breakdown of their foster care placement. Some foster parents described how adolescent foster children who had lived with them for several years had actively, and in some cases without their knowledge, worked on arranging to change their situation and, from the perspective of the foster parents, had thus initiated the breakdown of the placement. For example, some adolescent foster children approached the school social work service and received support from it; others had looked for new foster parents themselves.

*[...] and then we heard that she [the foster child] got in contact with the school social worker. She didn't talk to us. Some day we heard that the school social worker had arranged a meeting with her and her guardian in the social welfare office [...] [...] when the meeting was over we got a phone call and were informed that it was decided that she won't stay any longer with us."*

### **Lack of willingness on the part of school to work on integration**

The interviewed foster parents indicated that the school system can also have a destabilizing influence on foster care placements and this can give rise to breakdowns. A common criticism was what they per-

ceived as a lack of willingness on the part of schools to work on the integration of pupils who require greater attention. From the foster parents' perspective, the school system is not willing enough to engage with more challenging children and more complex integration processes; they are too quick to push for alternative schooling solutions, something that destabilizes the foster child and has impacts on foster care placement.

In one case, a school described a foster child's behaviour as increasingly intolerable in a regular classroom setting. The foster parents had fought for a very long time for the girl to be able to remain in the local school with the help of special arrangements and agreements. When the school eventually deemed that the child was no longer acceptable and excluded her from the school, she was temporarily taught at home by a private tutor who was a friend of the foster family. However, this solution also proved untenable and the child's guardian had to find a different solution. He found a special school in a village that was further away but close to where the foster child's brother was living in a different foster family. The guardian then decided to move the child to the same foster family as the brother against the will of the foster parents. The foster parents suffered enormously as a result of this breakdown in the foster care placement, which was initiated by the foster care system, and mainly attributed it not only to the challenging behaviour of the foster child but also to the school system's lack of willingness to work on the integration of 'difficult pupils'.

*"But she [the teacher] did not want to, she really, well this was my feeling, bullied the child. He didn't have a chance to integrate himself in school, although he always said*

*he wanted to go to that particular school, 'I like it there'."*

In other cases, foster children were moved to different placements and were sometimes separated from their siblings because, for example, there was no special school available in the foster parents' place of residence.

### ***Increased commitment or dissatisfaction on the part of the birth parents***

Other foster parents see the foster child's birth parents as sharing the responsibility for the placement breakdown they experienced. In some cases, the birth parents sought to increase their parental involvement in the child's life from a particular point in time in the placement (e.g. through more frequent contact), to have a say in the way the foster family was raising the child, or by expressing the wish to have the child come back to live with them. For example, one foster mother reports that she was involved in repeated conflicts with her foster child's father because he did not want his daughter to attend church services with the foster family and holiday camps organized by a free church.

Other foster parents reported a meeting at the youth welfare office with the mother of their foster child and her new partner. Because the placement in question was a voluntary one and the mother had custody, the 12-year old returned to live with the mother following the meeting after having spent seven years with the foster family. This development came as a shock to the foster parents. They reported that their relationship with the child's mother had deteriorated somewhat over the course of time, but from their perspective there had not been any major conflict with her.

It may be assumed in these cases that the question of the division of parental tasks between the foster parents and birth parents was not adequately understood and suitably explored and discussed by the foster care placement professionals. As a result, the division of tasks between the birth and foster parents was not re-negotiated and the conflict between them increased. In such cases, foster care placements frequently end with the return of the child to the birth family, and – as in the above-described case – this sometimes happens very abruptly and is experienced by the foster parents as breakdown.

### ***Stresses and burdens on foster parents***

In some cases it was possible to observe the accumulation of stresses and burdens on the foster parents over a particular period of time, which, combined with other factors, eventually contributed to the breakdown of the placement. In one foster family with three foster children and two birth children, a foster child had to undergo several very difficult operations, hence the foster mother was absorbed with caring for the child. She was often at the hospital and sometimes spent the night there to be with the child. As the situation progressed, the foster parents in question did not have sufficient time or energy to care for all of the children equally and, combined with one foster child's difficulties at school, this ultimately led to a placement breakdown. In hindsight, the foster mother recognized that they were not provided with adequate support from a family placement organization as another contributory factor. The support of an expert from a family placement organization might have enabled them to identify imminent and cumulative

difficulties at an earlier stage and to organize the necessary support services.

The ongoing accumulation of different stress factors can be identified in several of the accounts provided by the foster parents. However, despite experiencing considerable stress, some foster parents did not speak with the responsible social worker about their situation for a long time. Possible reasons why foster parents find themselves unable to speak about their own stress, despite suffering from very intense pressures for a long time, include perceived recriminations from the placement agency.

Some foster parents perceived that in going to the placement agency with problems that they would run the risk of being labelled as overburdened by the demands of foster care. In addition, the fear of being assessed as inadequate and not being allowed to take on any other foster children also emerged in the interviews. In cases in which the foster care allowance represents an important contribution to the family income this can lead to subsistence problems and fears.

Foster parents can have very high expectations of themselves in relation to their child-rearing skills and resilience. Another possible reason for their failure to raise issues of stress and difficulties with third parties is that it can be difficult and painful to admit that one may be unable to meet one's own expectations:

*"Yes, it was very difficult for me then. [...] I was completely devastated that I was also unable to put him [the foster child] on the right track. And to have to say: 'My limits have been reached.' As I can usually go beyond my limits. And, as I said, I simply noticed, 'that's enough'."*

### ***Support from the experts from the foster care system***

The role of the professionals from the foster care system during placements was repeatedly raised by the foster parents, although no uniform impression emerged in this regard. Some foster parents who experienced placement breakdown received intensive support during the placement and were satisfied with the support they received. Other foster parents felt that they were less well supported: they either received no assistance at all, the support they did receive was inadequate, or, as indicated above, the support came too late or was not requested.

*"We simply spoke time and again, but there were just more and more discussions and we had nobody, no institute [family placement organization] that helped us."*

Foster parents who were not supported by a family placement organization often assumed that such an organization would have been a helpful source of support for them.

Irrespective of their assessment of the level of expert support they received during the foster care placement, almost all foster parents felt they received too little support from the foster care system when the placement breakdown occurred. In some cases, the foster parents could not understand why the foster child was suddenly returned to the birth family and experienced this return as a breakdown. Others criticized the fact that foster placement representatives did not listen to them or inform them when important decisions were made. For example, one foster mother could not understand that the responsible authorities instigated a change of placement for her foster child on the child's request without consulting her in

advance. Some foster parents, who initiated a breakdown by prematurely terminating the foster care agreement, felt unsupported by the experts in their decision.

Adding to the criticisms of the foster placement and management process, some foster parents reported that they were explicitly forbidden from having any further contact with the foster child after transference and others reported that the question of contact was scarcely broached by foster care representatives in the context of the official termination of the foster care relationship.

*"We said that we would like to stay in contact with him [after the placement breakdown]. But we were not allowed to telephone or to visit him. Unfortunately we do not have contact anymore."*

Hence when it comes to the continuation or resumption of contact after placement breakdown, the foster children and foster parents are left to their own devices. It must not be forgotten that the question of the organization of contact is of relevance not only for the foster parents and the foster children leaving their care. The foster parent's own children and, possibly, other foster children in the family, and members of the extended family (e.g. grandparents) also face the question as to how, whether and in what form they wish to maintain contact with the foster child. They also lose a family member in a placement breakdown, and this can be a matter of considerable importance for them.

## Discussion and conclusions

These findings highlight the experience of foster care placement breakdown and its contributory factors from the perspective of foster children and foster parents. Placement breakdowns are experienced by both foster children and foster parents as emotional and significant events: all of the interviewees provided detailed accounts of their experiences, even several years after the events in question. The study also confirms that foster care placement breakdowns should be understood as complex and multifactorial processes.

Among the interviewed foster children, the experience and perception of 'not belonging' to the foster family assumed a particularly significant role in the breakdown of their foster care placements. From the perspective of the foster parents, it is possible to reconstruct different constellations of conditions that are linked to the placement breakdown process. The factors influencing the breakdown may also lie beyond the actors involved in the foster care relationship, for example the lack of willingness on the part of a school to work on the integration of a foster child.

These findings provide important indicators for foster care practice: the experience of some foster children of never having 'belonged' to their foster families or no longer feeling they belonged there indicates how important it is that the responsible foster agents provide intensive support to foster children and foster parents before and during placements. The provision of age-appropriate information for the foster child about the reasons for and objectives of the placement and about the role of foster and birth parents is also important. In addition, awareness must be raised among

foster parents regarding the challenges the foster child must overcome during the initial placement stages and in relation to the importance of belonging to the family (Reimer, 2010). The findings also demonstrate that foster care placement must be repeatedly assessed over the course of its duration with the involvement of all of the relevant parties. This is particularly important as the well-being of foster children can also deteriorate as a result of changes in the situation of the foster family, and stresses and difficulties can arise for the foster parents that necessitate continual evaluation of the foster placement. Our interviews have shown a reluctance on the part of both foster parents and foster children to discuss their dissatisfaction until far too late in the process of placement breakdown.

The reticence to bring forward conversations about foster placement tensions may be due to the fact that there are few channels through which parents and children can broach the subject and negotiate with each other without the viability of the placement being called into question. For fear of the institutional consequences, emerging difficulties are typically broached only at a late stage in the process. Broaching the topic of mutual differences in relation to expectations and/or dissatisfaction and discussing them openly can be difficult, threatening, and associated with the fear of loss for both parties. Foster care professionals assume a particular significance here in that they can be agents of mediation in foster placement breakdown. This multi-faceted role is underexplored in the literature, yet is clearly a critical element in the placement breakdown process. Our findings also show that the experience of foster children who find the courage to express their concerns to the relevant professionals in the foster care sys-

tem is that they are not listened to and not taken seriously – in view of the right of the child to the free expression of views in all matters affecting the child enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 12), this finding warrants particular attention.

The question regarding the organization of contact after the breakdown of a foster care placement is of central concern to foster parents. As our results show, the clarification and regulation of further contact between foster parents and foster children is only provided in exceptional cases. This can be explained by the lack of specialist concepts on the premature termination of foster care placements, relatively few concepts and approaches for the organization of contact between the foster child and foster parents and other family members following placement breakdown and exit from the foster family (Bombach, Gabriel, Stohler, & Werner 2018b).

The unregulated nature of post-placement-breakdown contact is conditioned by a lack of formal responsibility mechanisms for the post-foster care placement processes following a breakdown. The guardian will typically see to the organization of a follow-up solution in contact with the child (foster family, residential care, birth family). In many cases, the family placement organization will remain in contact with the foster parents but not with the foster child. As part of the organization of the exit process, a professionally-designed exit strategy must take the foster child and all members of the foster family into consideration, actively explore questions relating to the organization of contact and relations, and by so doing will offer all participants the possibility of expressing their wishes and concerns. However, the communication wishes

and needs of the different participants rarely coincide at the time of placement breakdown. This means that it is all the more important to negotiate how, when, and in what format contact can be re-established after foster placement breakdown as we described earlier (Bombach et al., 2018a).

## Final remarks and general recommendations

The results of this qualitative study give valuable insights into the reasons that can lead to a foster placement breakdown. They demonstrate that it is critically important to include a foster child's and foster parents' perspectives in further research and to develop strategies to increase placement stability.

Even though there are inherent limitations regarding sample size and the age of participants, the results provide key areas

of focus for social workers in the area of foster care. In particular, we recommend that the best interests of the children in foster families be guaranteed by speaking with and listening to children more regularly and to develop professional strategies to perceive and react to crises in foster care that take children's perspectives into consideration.

Our results also indicate a greater need for constant engagement and dialogue between foster families, foster children, and foster care professionals. The dynamics of foster families need to be inserted into constant feedback loops that will allow for more fluid and timely communication. As moderators, social workers should enable to facilitate the mutual understanding of expectations between foster children and foster parents in order to make adjustments in due time either to prevent a placement breakdown, or if it is unavoidable, to ensure that it can be handled in the best possible way.

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