



# THE PERSPECTIVES OF FAMILY FOSTER CARE IN HUNGARY

## Research paper

Granted by the Visegrad Fund

Family Child Youth Association  
2017

## CONTENT

Introduction .....	2
I. The Hungarian system of foster care .....	2
I.1 Legislation .....	2
I.1.1 Principles of the legislation .....	2
I.2. Elements of foster care .....	3
I.2.1 Actors.....	3
I.2.2 Recruitment.....	3
I.2.3 Qualification .....	4
I.2.4 Preparation, training.....	4
I.2.5 Matching .....	6
I.2.6 Placement.....	6
I.3 Professional support.....	6
I.4 Monitoring.....	7
I.5 Managing crisis situations.....	7
I.6 Keeping contact with the biological family.....	7
II. Research outcomes .....	8
II.1 Respondents' demographic characteristics.....	8
II.2 Becoming a foster parent.....	10
II.3 Children's arrival to the foster family .....	12
II.4 Integration of foster children in the foster family.....	13
II.5 Foster children's integration into the local community .....	14
II.6 Keeping contact with the biological families .....	14
II.7 Experiences of fostering .....	15
II.7.1 Foster families.....	15
II.7.2 The role of foster parenting .....	16
II.7.3 Challenges, unresolvable issues .....	16
II.7.5 Financial aspects of foster parenting .....	17

## Introduction

This report presents the results of the research conducted in the framework of the project called „Perspectives of foster parents in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia”, granted by the Visegrad Fund. Research activities were carried out by the Hungarian project partner, Family Child Youth Association.

In the framework of the research, altogether 50 foster parents were interviewed, selected by an expert sampling. Settlements involved in the research represent all types of settlements and settlement functions (periphery – district centre – county town – capital), thus we collected data in Budapest, Debrecen, Győr, Kecskemét, and in Mezőtúr and Encs districts.

Foster parents were involved partly by foster care networks, partly by territorial child protection institutions: they informed foster parents about the research aims, recruited them, and also provided them with the necessary location for the interviews. We acknowledge all their efforts which contributed to the success of the research.

During data gathering we used multiple methods. Professionals of the project partner countries have elaborated a set of questions, which served as the basis of all other national research. Nevertheless, unlike other partner countries, in Hungary only a part of these questions have been gathered via self-completed questionnaires, namely the quantifiable, easy-to-answer ones; soft variables (questions measuring attitudes, opinions, stories) were asked by individual, or, if circumstances didn't allow us to ask foster parents individually, focus-group interviews.

## I. The Hungarian system of foster care

### I.1 Legislation

Hungary has ratified the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, Currently the following laws and decrees ensure legislative framework for child protection: a) LXVI law of 1991 on Promulgation of the UN Convention on the Right of the Child<sup>1</sup>., b) XXXI law of 1997 on Child Protection and Guardianship Administration<sup>2</sup>, and c) 15/1998. NM decree on the Duties and Operational Conditions of Child Care Institutions and Persons providing Personal Care<sup>3</sup>. A decree in 2013 regulated specifically the legal provisions of the working conditions of foster carers and special status of substitute parents.<sup>4</sup>

#### I.1.1 Principles of the legislation

- When undertaking actions, agencies and decision-making bodies have to take into consideration primarily the child's best interests, ensuring their rights recognized by laws

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1 1991/LXIV Law, [https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=99100064.TV](https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=99100064.TV)

2 [https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=99700031.TV](https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=99700031.TV)

3 [https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=99800015.NM](https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=99800015.NM)

4 [https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=a1300513.kor](https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=a1300513.kor)

- The primary consideration has to be given to ensure family environment for the care of children , thus services have to be provided locally, in accordance with the family's needs
- Children deprived of their family environment should be placed in substitute family care, primarily in foster care
- The principle of equal treatment and non-discrimination prevails

## I.2. Elements of foster care

### I.2.1 Actors

In Hungary, the state, the church and non-profit organizations are the actors in the provision of foster care. Children taken care by outside of their families are under the authority of the county child protection services (CCCS), located in 19 county seats and in the capital, which – in case of a recommendation for foster care – are obliged to find a foster family for the child in principle.

Foster families work in networks uphold by state, church-based or non-profit organizations. Currently there are approximately 50 foster care networks in the country (no updated statistical data is available), with huge territorial differences. According to a 2009 survey, Borsod, Hajdú-Bihar, Pest, and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties exceed country average in respect of foster placement<sup>5</sup>. Increase of the proportion of church-maintained networks was a significant change in recent years due to the political commitment and the much higher financial support provided to them based on the agreement between Hungary and the Vatican in 1997.<sup>6</sup>

In 2015 app. 23.000 children and young adults were in care, almost two-third of them in foster care<sup>7</sup>

### I.2.2 Recruitment

Foster care is promoted by the current government via temporary nationwide campaigns, foster care agencies also take part in promotion, as well as in recruitment of foster parents. Regardless of the maintainer, recruitment is practically continuous, with a significant increase at Easter and Christmas periods. Foster care networks' management and foster care supervisors are both responsible for recruitment, relying primarily on local printed media, flyers and their own community – the latter particularly occurs in church-run foster networks. Despite of all the efforts made there is a constant shortage of applicants similarly to other countries, more from the deprived areas of the country where high unemployment rate and lack of proper

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<sup>5</sup> Research on Foster Care. Hungarian Academy of Sciences – Delphoi Consulting, 2009. [file:///C:/Users/user/Documents/revita/visegrad\\_i\\_projekt/tanulmany/hatteranyagok/babusik\\_neveloszuloi\\_kutatas\\_pilot\\_2009.pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Documents/revita/visegrad_i_projekt/tanulmany/hatteranyagok/babusik_neveloszuloi_kutatas_pilot_2009.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> 1997. évi CXXIV. Törvény az egyházak hitéleti és közcélú tevékenységének anyagi feltételeiről (Law on the financial conditions of the religious and public activities of the church) [http://njt.hu/cgi\\_bin/njt\\_doc.cgi?docid=30718](http://njt.hu/cgi_bin/njt_doc.cgi?docid=30718)

<sup>7</sup> Number of foster parents can be traced in statistics of the Central Statistical Bureau: in 2011 5.526 foster parents worked in the country (<https://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/idoszaki/pdf/allamigondoskodas.pdf>). Due to heavy expansion of church-based networks, around 6.000 foster parents may work in the Hungary in 2017.

income generation has been an issue for a long time. Despite of the high number of applicants though many of them do not comply with the requirements or change their mind during the preparatory procedure or shortly after the placement of children. This is partly due to the changed procedure and preparation and the lack of appropriate information provided on the nature and extent of the activity. It is also related to the limited resources and support provided to the foster families and foster children in all areas of their needs.

### I.2.3 Qualification

The qualification process has been changed several times during the last couple of years. While between 1997-2012 the 60 hours PRIDE (FIKSZ) pre-service training used to be compulsory for all, since then by utilising EU funds new forms and content has been reintroduced and modified: the prospective foster parent's application for an operational license is submitted toward the relevant government office by the foster care agency. The government office issues the license in case the following conditions are met: a) a minimum of primary school qualification, b) submitted home study conducted at the applicant foster family's home, involving all family members<sup>8</sup>, c) moral certificate not older than 3 months, verifying the lack of criminal record, d) GP's declaration about medical eligibility, e) certification of a preparatory training depending on what time the applicant entered the system.

Before contracting a foster parent, the applicant has to participate in a 500 hours long training. In addition, according to professional standards, partly covered by FIKSZ training, foster care agencies may apply psychological screening as well: in these cases, applicants' suitability is generally measured by personality tests by psychologists.

### I.2.4 Preparation, training

At the moment, two parallel procedure is in force regarding compulsory trainings. For those who have already applied to become a foster parent, FIKSZ (PRIDE) pre-service training is compulsory, and they also have to take part in a 240 hours long preparatory training. In case of new entrants, a 500 hours long vocational training is compulsory, the first two modules covering FIKSZ curriculum.

As for FIKSZ (PRIDE) training, this group training allows applicants to assess their suitability as well as to obtain information about fostering tasks. The training lasts 60 hours, with a maximum number of 20 participants, and consists of the 14 steps of PRIDE Model of Practice, including a family visit, interactive group work facilitated by a foster/adoptive parent and a foster care supervisor. Both partners in the prospective foster family are obliged to take part. The training aims to make applicants acquire the following five competences:

- 1) Child care and protection
- 2) Meeting the child's needs, handling developmental delays
- 3) Supporting relations between foster child and the biological family

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<sup>8</sup> The family only becomes eligible if living in long-term leased apartment or have an own one, and can provide rooms of sufficient size for foster children, allowing to separate the sexes. These facilities determine the number of potential foster children, which is included in the operational license. A foster parents may take care of 7 children at maximum, including his/her own ones.

- 4) Setting up safe, life-long relationships for the child
- 5) Ability to work in a group of child protection professionals

By the end of the training, the candidate will be able to decide whether she/he is suitable to work as a foster parent just like the facilitators of the group can decide based on their experiences and the home visit about their recommendation on suitability. Completion of the training is certified by an official certification. Fee of the training is between 40.000 – 60.000 HUF/person (app. 130-200 Euro), usually covered by the foster care agency as a future employer. Costs are dedicated to foster care agencies according to the ministry's predefined cadre personnel, but distribution of the cadre personnel is subjective and unpredictable.

A 500 long preparatory training – registration number OKJ 32761 01 – is also obligatory for candidates. The proportion of theoretical and practical hours is 48-52%, the training is led in groups. One member of the candidate foster family has to take part, the other may participate if paying the costs.

Training modules partly overlap FIKSZ program's modules, but discuss them in a more detailed manner mostly in a classroom setting:

- 1) Basic caring tasks around the foster child
- 2) Preparation of the family environment
- 3) Development of the child's, preparation for independent living
- 4) Administrative duties of the foster parent
- 5) Education and care of children with special needs
- 6) Employment
- 7) First Aid skills

Only agencies and providers having a training accreditation are entitled to conduct the training, involving diverse professionals (foster care supervisors, psychologist, social workers, teachers etc.). Practically, trainings are organized by foster care agencies for new entrants, in most of the times covering the costs as well, which vary between 120.000-160.000 HUF/person (400-530 Euro). In a few cases this cost is covered by foster parents themselves. A 20 pages long final study is part of the successful completion of the course, but participants also have to certify their practical spent in different child care services organisations as well as at other foster parents' home, and their participation in professional skills development trainings (15-15% of the total training period). The training's output is an OKJ certification, meaning a professional accreditation, like semi-skilled workers.

The experiences so far are very mixed, the training is way too long and not meeting the needs of the perspective foster parents prior the actual placements. It would be much more important and useful to provide them with a short pre-service program (like the PRIDE/FIKSZ program) and an on-going in-service support based on their needs and reflections, suggestion of the supervisors.

### 1.2.5 Matching

Prior to matching, a child protection expert committee prepares a report based on the available documentation and the further investigation if any that recommends the placement option of the child, that can be foster care. In accordance with the parliamentary decision of the current government, all children under the age of 12 should be placed into foster care besides disabled children and multiple sibling groups as they are hard to be placed into family settings. Children aged over 12 years, or in case children having behaviour problems or some sort of addiction, placement in children's home is a possible option. Considering the recommendation of the expert panel, the county child protection services prepare an individual placement plan, discussing comprehensively the child's needs in principle since 2013. The county child protection services are also responsible to find a suitable foster family for the child at first whether in their own network, or among the foster care agencies available in the area.

During the course of matching, the child protection services should facilitate and support the building of a relationship between the perspective foster child and foster family. Major aspect considered during matching is the geographical proximity of the foster and the biological family, regulated as not more than 50 km but seldom possible and enforced.

### 1.2.6 Placement

Based on the individual placement plan, in principle a placement meeting takes place with the participation of the child, foster parents, biological parents, and every professional who has meaningful information about the case. Nevertheless, not all child protection services follow these standards. The guardianship office is also invited to the meeting, but for this organization it's not obligatory to appoint a representative to participate, despite of the fact that they are the final decision making body mostly working from the available documents, and not meeting none of those involved in person. Following meeting is a recommendation appointing a concrete foster family, and – together with the committee's expertise – should be submitted to the territorial guardianship office. Unless there is a reason to cause a different decision, the guardianship office approves the recommendation, and take a decision about placement. The placement decision includes regulation about how the child will keep contact with the biological family. Keeping contact is an opportunity and at the same time an obligation for all parties.

Theoretically, the foster family has the right to refuse the child, but in practice they don't dare to declare it, since they take it as a sign of their inadequate fostering competences. However, the anxiety against the child often remains – in these cases they bring the child back to children's home. The child also have the right to tell his/her opinion about the foster family, but mainly teenagers exercise this right.

Placement protocol is not a law-regulated process, rather governed by professional principles and standards.

## 1.3 Professional support

Foster parents are obliged and entitled to keep regular contact with the appointed foster care supervisor. Foster parents may contact the consultant at any time when needed, but they have to meet obligatory in every three weeks in the foster family's home in principle. The same

frequency prevails in keeping contact with the child protection guardian, but it's rather formal – only in case of troubles will the relationship fill up with concrete content. Foster parents have to ensure that the child and the guardian can talk privately. Both professional helpers are overloaded as there are more families and children they should provide guidance and support than possible, and due to the lack of additional back up services (psychologist, psychiatrist etc.) they cannot refer them often to anywhere. The supervision and support of those helping the foster families and foster children is not resolved either.

Foster parents have to participate in 6 hours in-service trainings organized two times a year by the service provider. During the trainings, the participants are usually discussing issues related to challenges in relation to foster care and the child's development.

Organized supervision is usually not available for foster parents. Self-help groups of foster families have been set up time to time, but in most of the times they dissolve due to the lack of time and energy. Substantial community support is not available.

According to the law, foster parents are entitled to holidays: those fostering one child have a free workday in every quarter year; in case of two or three foster children two workdays, and in case of four or more foster children three workdays should be guaranteed. In practice, the agencies usually redeem (pay) these free days, since a number of foster parents and the agencies cannot provide substitution. Substitutes are usually extended family members (e.g. grandparents, older siblings, and children).

#### I.4 Monitoring

In accordance with the above described, foster parents' activity is partly monitored by the foster care supervisors (representing the foster care agency), and partly by the guardian (representing the Social and Guardianship Office). In case the foster parents or the child requires, a child rights representative may also take part in the process. It usually occurs in controversial situations. There are however altogether 12 child rights representatives responsible for the 23 000 children and young persons taken care of by the State.

#### I.5 Managing crisis situations

Crisis management has not been standardized, thus parties usually act under extreme constraint. Crisis situations might be among others: a) unexpected, serious illness of the foster parent, b) foster family crisis (conflicts between foster parents, divorce, etc.), c) lack of support for acting out child, abusing others and hurting themselves d) foster parent cannot cope with the child's behaviour problems. In these cases, either the child leaves the family or the foster parent brings the child back. The guardian has the right to retrieve the child from the foster family at any time if he considers it as needed. Nevertheless, in case of a child living in a children's home this right does not apply, thus the principle of equal treatment cannot prevail.

#### I.6 Keeping contact with the biological family

Biological families are usually provided limited right to shape decisions about the child's placement: as a rule, their opinions can be declared but are mostly not considered as relevant.



Primarily the guardianship office is responsible for ensuring the contact between the child and the biological family, given that this office has regulated the manner of keeping contact without (in most cases) meeting any of the parties in person. In addition, the foster family, the biological family, the child, and the guardian also have responsibility on adhering to the recommendations concerning the relationship. The manner of keeping contact in principle is regularly reviewed for that relationship can strengthen, and the child can be reunited with the family or freed for adoption.

Supporting biological families would be the obligation of the local family-child welfare services in accordance with the child protection legislation; however once a child is placed out of the family the parents get even less if any help to be able to reunite with their children. There is no clarity on the forms and extent of support they are eligible for e.g. housing, financial and other forms of aid. In principle for financial reasons no child could be separated from their families; in practice though at least 40% of the children are placed primarily because of poverty and its consequences. A case management plan should be prepared, including tasks related for the family to be fulfilled but without the support they are entitled to be able coping.

Open discussion, meeting and mediation has not become an accepted practice yet, despite of the legal provisions available. It depends on the readiness, willingness and capacity in all means of the agencies and the professionals working there, even family case conferences are organized random despite of the clear obligations described in the child protection law.

Supporting reunification efforts to help children going back to their biological families is one of the basic duties of the foster family, however, this is one of the challenges for many of them, partly due to the long years spent in the foster home, partly because most of the conditions are missing to help developing and strengthening the needed relationship between the child and the biological families, and as the biological families are not provided with the needed support to be able and suitable for taking good enough care of their children. The children should be involved in this process in principle, as they are entitled to express their views in all issues related to them. Nevertheless, this principle is not put into practice.

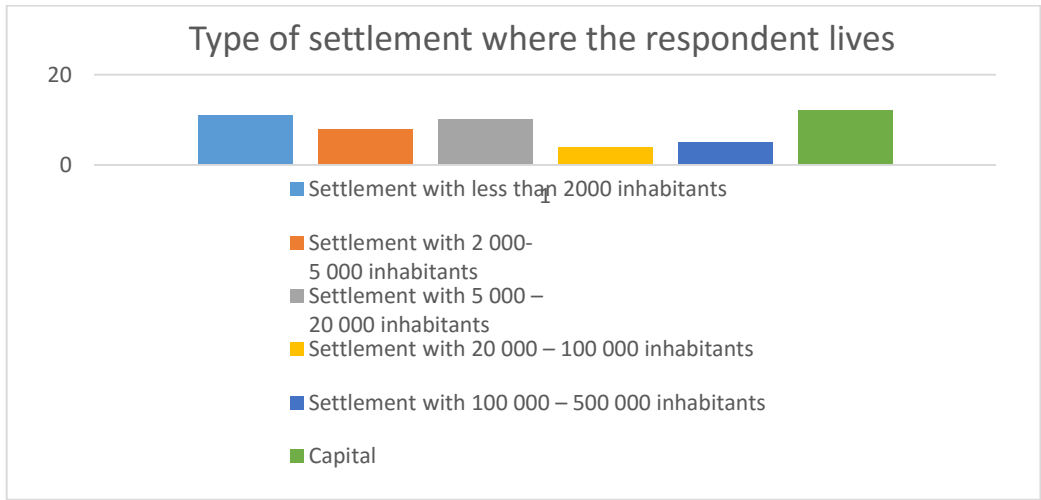
## II. Research outcomes

### II.1 Respondents' demographic characteristics

In the framework of the research, we visited altogether **six regions** in Hungary: apart from the capital city Budapest, we have involved foster parents in three county centres cities (Debrecen, Győr, Kecskemét), and in two disadvantaged sub-region centres (Encs and Mezőtúr). Number of respondents varied on a wide scale: while in Budapest we reached 13 foster parents, in county centre cities we met 7-10 persons, but in Mezőtúr area we could reach only 3 foster parents during the data gathering.

**Breakdown of the respondents by type of settlement is relatively balanced**, only the number of those living in a settlement with less than 5.000 inhabitants, and of those living in a city with 100.000-500.000 inhabitants is lower than the number of respondents living in other types of settlements. Half of the foster families are living in settlements with less than 2000 inhabitants, substantially influencing the access to services and opportunities for both the children and families living there.

1. Chart

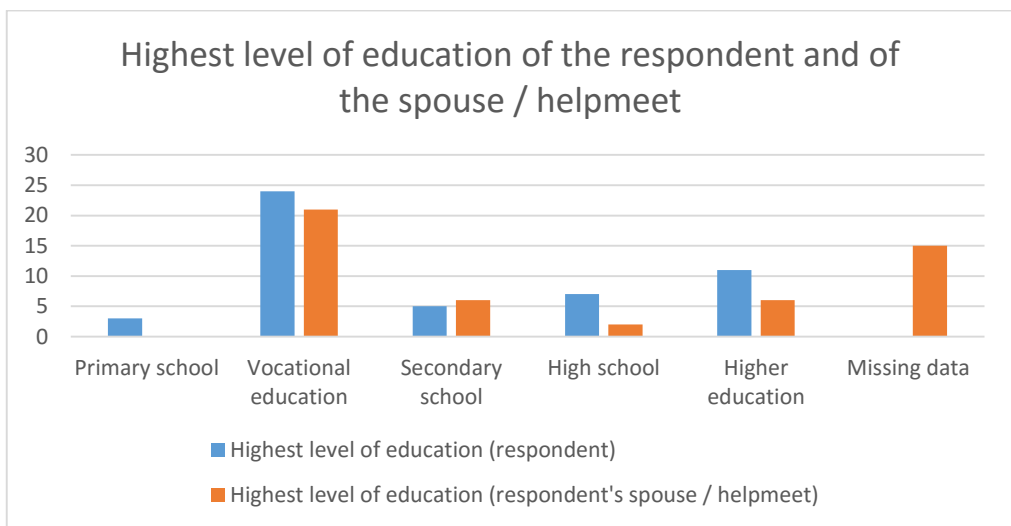


**More than half of the respondents are fostering with their spouses, 16 foster parents are contracted alone, while 4 respondents work with someone designated to help.** Those employed without a helping family member are fostering 1-4 children, while more than half of the couples foster 1-3 children. Number of foster children obviously depends on the size of the household and on the rooms available for foster children, but often on the finances as foster parents are remunerated based on the number of children in their care.

**Average age of the respondents is very high, 51, 5 years.** The youngest foster parent is 38 years old, and only 9 respondents are under 45 years. More than half of the sample is between 46 and 55 years, and 13 persons are close to retirement. The average age of spouses and helpmeet are even higher, 67, 2 years.

**More than half of the foster parents have finished only vocational education,** only slightly more than a fifth of respondents have a diploma or degree obtained in higher education. Foster mothers are generally more qualified than their partners.

2. Chart



**The majority of respondents are foster mothers,** only 3 foster fathers have been involved in the research. **32 respondents confessed themselves as traditional foster families,** representing 17 formerly called professional foster parents, who mainly live in Budapest

and in Győr. 5 foster parents work as particular<sup>9</sup> and 1 person as special<sup>10</sup> foster parent. **This is especially peculiar as the regulations have changed the previous categorisation and currently there is only one category available due to the new contract system that is employing with a special status all foster parents** according to the Government decree 513./2013. (XII.29.)<sup>11</sup>.

Nonetheless, according to the interviews, besides the care benefit received as foster parent, some respondents have other sources of income as well as it is permitted by the decree Two foster parents are working as entrepreneurs, two of them receive some sort of child care benefit (maternity leave / parental leave ), three foster parents are unemployed and receive job search benefits or employment subsidies, two of them receive a disability benefit, and one person receives pension.

## II.2 Becoming a foster parent

Foster parents have identified a **number of motivational factors**, which played a role in their desire to become carers. One fifth of them have met foster care as an option in their early childhood, whether because their parents fostered children in their own family, or because they had to take care of a child from their own family at a younger age. Some of the respondents claimed that fostering replaced parenting of their own adult children not living with them anymore, and others reported about a personal linkage to a child left without family, or to other foster parents, deeply attaching and motivating them to serve as foster parents. Only some of the respondents reported financial reasons, the lack of local employment opportunities as one (but not exclusive) reason of becoming a foster parent.

**First personal experience with foster parenting was mostly influenced by acquaintances:** two-fifth of the respondents claimed that they first had heard about fostering opportunity from a friend or from other foster parents. For 15 respondents the media (primarily local newspapers) served as a source of information about becoming a foster parent, while 10 persons met foster parenting already in their childhood. **Efficiency of personal information channels among recruitment techniques should thus be highlighted** – the exchange of own experiences, direct encounter with foster parenting has the biggest potential to attract perspective foster parents.

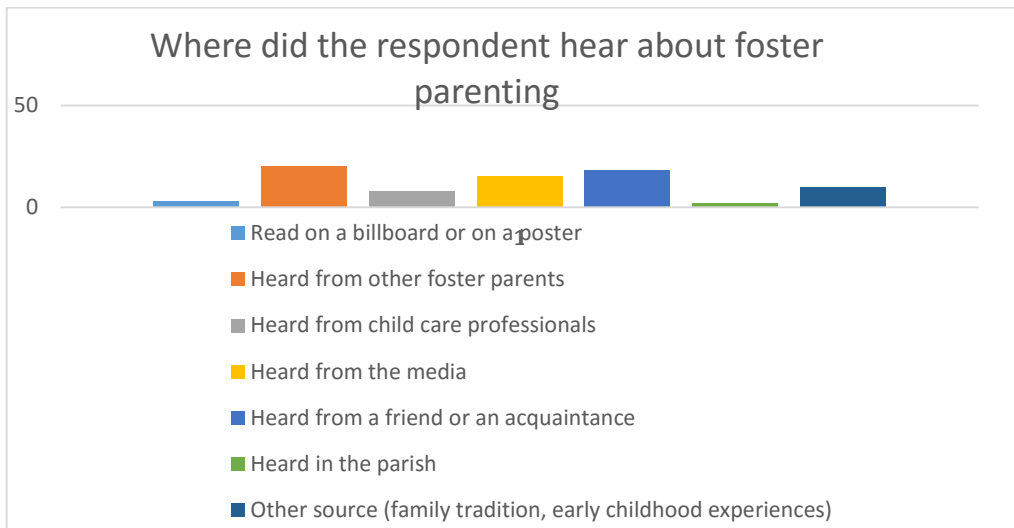
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<sup>9</sup> A “particular” or “specific” foster parent is a foster parent, who – according to the government decree regulating specific issues of foster parenting as an employment – is suitable for ensuring a balanced care of children younger than 3 years, or having chronic diseases or disabilities (CVV. Law of 2013 9 §. 4.)

<sup>10</sup> A special foster parent is a foster parent who – according to the government decree regulating specific issues of foster parenting as an employment – is suitable for ensuring a balanced care of children having severe psychological or severe dissociative symptoms, or being addicted to a psychoactive material needing special care. (CVV. Law of 2013 9 §. 3.)

<sup>11</sup> [https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy\\_doc.cgi?docid=a1300513.kor](https://net.jogtar.hu/jr/gen/hjegy_doc.cgi?docid=a1300513.kor)

### 3. Chart



**First step in becoming a foster parent is the application and the assessment of suitability.** More than half of the respondents reported that within less than 6 months have they passed these two first steps; one fifth of them had to wait almost a year, and for five foster parents it took a year to receive the decision of idleness. **Subsequently, the next step is to obtain eligibility**, including an obligatory training. This step in half of the cases took not more than half a year, while for the rest it took maximum one year to obtain eligibility.

All of the foster parents participated in the FIKSZ (PRIDE) training with their partners, and were satisfied with the training 8, 1 on average (in a 10-point scale). Besides, 17 respondents have also completed the 500 hours long foster parenting training, 8 foster parents obtained the 300 hours one, and 7 persons had to complete the 240 hours training (also not operating these days). Almost all of the respondents regularly meet other participants of the trainings, primarily because territorially they belong to the same foster parents' network now.

After obtaining eligibility, a shorter period was needed until the **placement of the first foster child**: in case of 32 respondents, it took less than 6 months.

Foster parents **suggest the involvement of their own children living still in their households in the preparatory trainings**, since this would ease not only the foster child's integration to the foster family, but also the adjustment of all family members to the new situation.

Although - according to the interviews – **foster parents participated in several preparatory trainings**, depending on what time they have engaged in foster care (and which training was compulsory by law in the given period), they agreed that even if the information provided during preparation was useful, **a number of issues – which would have been useful in practice – have not been raised.** One of these topics concerned the minimum necessary information related to a child's placement, such as the history of the child, illnesses, need of medical care, etc. They also lacked information about, disabilities, such as mental health problems and learning difficulties. They would also need an accurate preparation about how to support children in recovering from trauma and abuse. Keeping contact with the child's biological parents, reunification, or placement to other foster parents have also not been touched upon during the preparation. Contact and work with authorities – including

cooperation with seconded guardian –, as well as administrative procedures, for example the replacement of official documents also remained unclear.

Summarizing the above, foster parents had the opinion that **preparatory trainings have not sufficiently prepared them to practice and to everyday challenges**, “... *trainers presented an ideal system and not reality*”, “...*if trainers have presented real life, all participants would have stood up and gone home*”.

### II.3 Children’s arrival to the foster family

According to the interviews, **quality and quantity of the child-related information provided to foster parents depends on the standards, practice and opportunities of the local family and child welfare services, and on the availability of the children’s documentation** (often made impossible due to the family’s trekking, or other reasons), thus foster parents reported about large differences.

Generally, **when a child is placed in the foster family due to a crisis situation, foster parents receive only a basic set of information**, including the child’s name, age and a short summary of the immediate placement reasons. Nevertheless, in a number of cases the placement has no crisis indication, and still, even the minimum information is missing: “*Once I was notified at noon that children will be placed in my home. They arrived in half an hour and I didn’t even know if they were boys or girls...*” Another general experience is the **lack of sufficient information about the children’s diseases, disabilities, developmental delays, or mental health issues**.

The **reason for the lack of information is partly due to the structural nature** (standards of local family and child welfare services, trekking of the families, high case loads, missing co-operation between the sectors and agencies etc.), but (according to respondents) partly can be attributed to the fact that **information concerning the child’ disability or other problems would definitely affect the chances of placement, thus child protection services find it better to hold them back**.

Respondents reported about cases when they refused to accept the child because of an information of this nature – a particularly typical example is, when a sexually abused child would mean a potential risk for the other foster or biological children. “*There were cases when we didn’t want to take the child and it all went wrong; anyway, I think that without a mutual acceptance there’s not real cooperation between foster parents and foster children.*” Nonetheless, a lot of cases have been reported when foster parents didn’t have preliminary information about the child’s problem, and still, they did their best to ensure the needed support. “*In my case, although we didn’t know it, we had to go to the hospital to pick up a child whose eye was dazzled by a stick by her mother. We’ve had terrible difficulties with him...*”

Whatever the current practice is, it is important to state that **according to the respondents, foster parents are entitled to get all essential information about the foster child**.

Foster parents reported about a number of **developmental delays, disabilities that are challenging the life of both foster parents and children in their care**. Most of the respondents reported about mental health issues and developmental delays (16 and 15 cases), but one fifth of them take care of foster children who have some sort of disability,

chronicle diseases or nutritional intolerance / allergy. Also, one fifth of them reported about a child who has been abused prior the placement.

Foster parents are mainly informed about chronic diseases, allergy or abuse, while **disabilities, mental health issues, developmental delays are usually unknown before the child's arrival**, although these are the issues that challenge the most the foster family. Among other special needs of the children, epilepsy, hyperactivity, alcohol syndrome and several forms of learning difficulties have been noted.

4. Chart Foster children's handicaps

Are any of the foster children affected by the problem (number of „yes” answers)		Was the foster parent informed about the problem prior to placement (number of „yes” answers)
Disability	11	5
Mental health issues	16	9
Chronic diseases	11	8
Allergy, intolerance	9	8
Developmental delays	15	10
Abuse	11	8
Other	8	6

**Most of the disabled children are fostered in families that have been fostering for more than ten years, thus have extensive experiences concerning children's special needs** – half of the children having a mental health issue and one third of children having developmental delays or being previously abused are fostered by these families.

#### II.4 Integration of foster children in the foster family

Although professional protocols require a **two-week long familiarization period** before the placement occurs, potential foster parents and children not always have the opportunity to go through this process. In some cases the urgency of placement doesn't make familiarization encounters possible, but often the placement process is not providing the circumstances needed to introduce a familiarization phase before the child's placement. Perspective foster parents and children usually meet once before the child's arrival; several meetings and time spent together are very rare. In case of children taken from infant's homes, foster parents usually have to visit the child several times (not one foster parent had to visit the baby 8-10 times), which – according to them – is not necessarily justified, and raises serious logistical and financial issues to the foster parent. Respondents agreed that **in case of teenagers, the familiarization phase have a greater significance**, since it serves as a basis for mutual sympathy and smooth cooperation. This is obviously demonstrating the lack of information about the attachment and bonding procedure needed for children of all ages, and demonstrates the insufficiency of the preparation and knowledge about the developmental needs of a child.

Following placement, **integration of the child in the foster family is usually seamless** according to the respondents, especially if biological children of foster parents are well prepared and provide essential support for the foster child. According to respondents, **patience and acceptance** are the keys to successful integration.

## II.5 Foster children’s integration into the local community

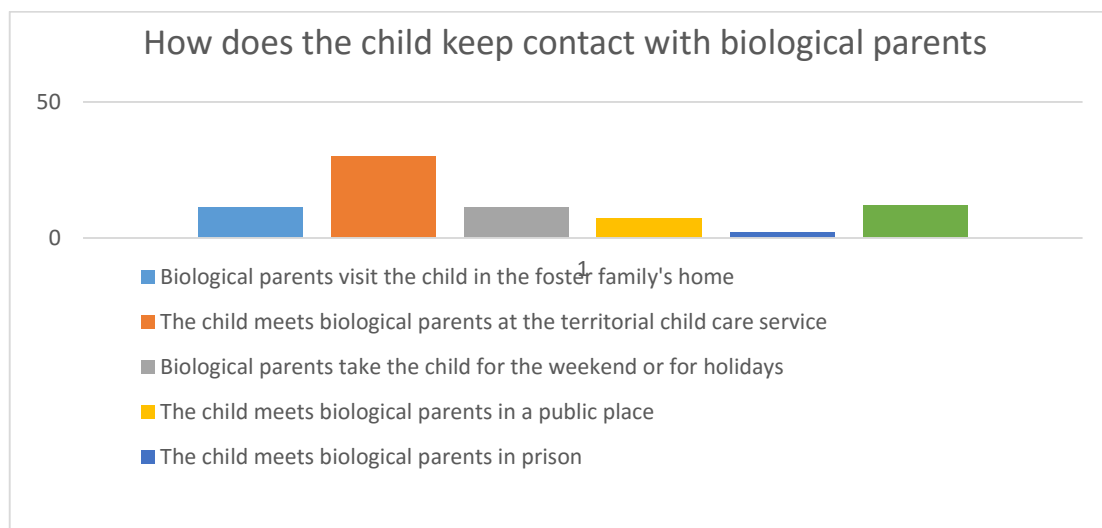
According to the interviews, **foster children’s integration into the local community** vary widely and generally **mainly depends on human factors**. One aspect is to what extent foster parents are accepted members of the local community, and how they can support the child’s integration. Another important issue is whether professionals, public and local authorities, institutions in the family’s surroundings are welcoming and inclusive; and of course, much depends on the child’s personality and actual status as well.

## II.6 Keeping contact with the biological families

In case the guardianship decision doesn’t declare the opposite, **foster children have the right to keep contact with their biological parents**.

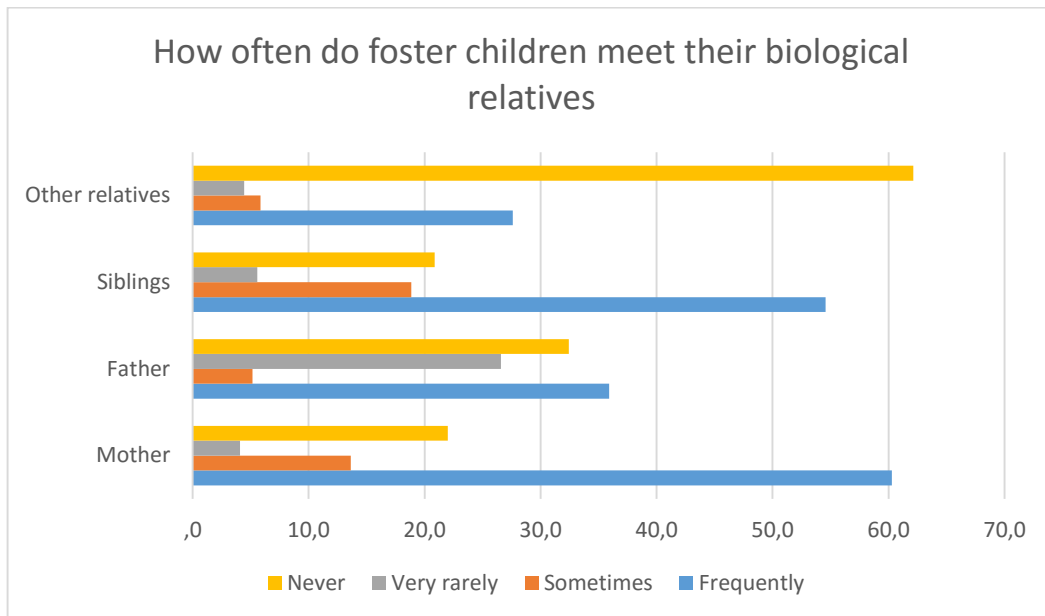
Foster children of respondents **most often meet their parents in the office of the territorial child care service**, 30 foster parents reported about it. A little more than on fifth of respondents said that their foster children communicate with their biological parents via a sort of IT device, including email, community media and phone, while 11-11 respondents reported that biological parents visit their children in the foster family’s home, or take them for the weekend or for holiday.

5. Chart



**Foster children have got in most instances regular contact with their biological mother:** 60% of them meet her regularly, 13% rarely, and 4% very rarely. **The relationship with their biological father is far less intense:** 32, 5% has no contact at all with the father, only 36% communicate with him on a regular basis. Foster children also keep close relationship with their biological siblings, more than half of them meet them regularly. 62% of foster children never meet any other biological relatives, while one fourth of them regularly communicate with them – is most of the cases with grandparents.

6. Chart



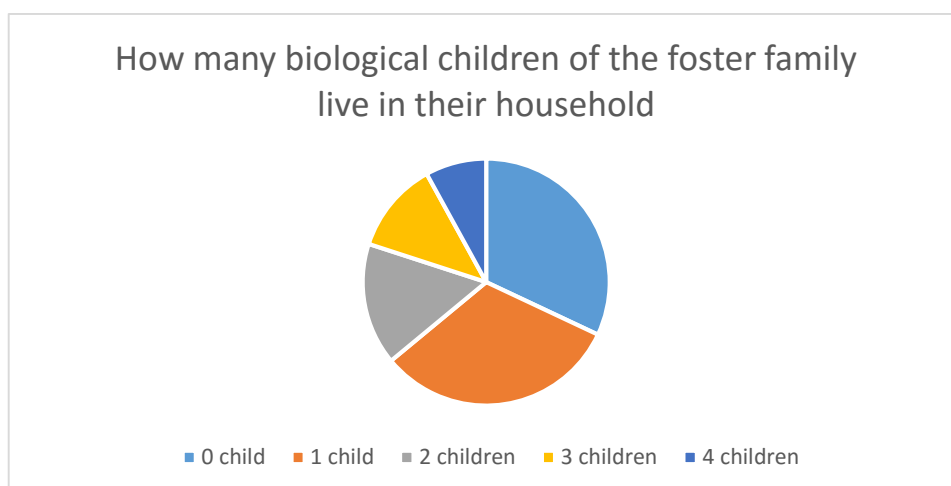
## II.7 Experiences of fostering

### II.7.1 Foster families

The majority of foster families (30 respondents) have been fostering children for at least 5 years, only 7 respondents work as a foster parent for less than 3 years.

Two-third of the respondents have only one or no biological children of their own living in their household, while in 8 cases two biological children, in 6 cases three children, and in 4 cases 4 children are living within the foster family.

7. Chart



Especially in the case of experienced foster parents it's important to learn, how many foster children have left their household for any reason. 19 respondents reported that some of the foster children left because of achieving maturity age; almost half of them have already facilitated a foster child's reunification with his/her biological family (some foster parents have reunified 7 children); 15 persons reported about adoption, 10 of them about a child's



placement to another foster family, and 5 foster parents had the experience of the placement of the foster children in their care into a children's home. One respondent has fostered 22 children until now, not including the ones she's currently fostering.

**Half of the respondents foster 2 or 3 children**, in most of the cases foster children are siblings, while the rest have 1, 4 or 5 foster children. 2 respondents are fostering 7 children at the moment.

### II.7.2 The role of foster parenting

**As for judging their own role as foster parents, responses vary on a wide scale.** Some of the respondents emphasized a supporting, assistive role, focusing on the facilitation of the child's integration into the society. Others emphasized an educative-caring role, aiming to preserve the child's health and to support their development. Some of them think that their most important task is to take over the role of biological parents (particularly if the child has no biological relative who could take care of him/her), while some respondents believe that all the above aspects are important part of their fostering identity. *"Actually, I think fostering is about all the above, since we took over this. I do fostering as a profession, but of course we cannot substitute biological parents. It's about to make our best to take care of them, educate them, to prepare them for adulthood."*

A number of aspects have also been identified as the **ultimate goal of this profession**: for some of the foster parents the overall objective of fostering is the reunification with biological parents (obviously only if it's a real option); for others, the aim is to compensate the child's unmet needs and to provide secure attachment. Preparation for independent living and anticipating appreciation from the community have also been raised as important goals of fostering.

**Foster parents are well aware of their own strengths.** Almost all of the respondents highlighted the **representation of the child's rights** as a major strength, even if they have to do it in a highly adversary environment. Another important positive point is their capability to provide the child with a stable, loving atmosphere. Flexibility, consistency, the ability to represent a quality family model, ensuring a safe environment, the capability to set up a good relationship with biological families and the ability to prepare the child for independent life have also been mentioned.

### II.7.3 Challenges, unresolvable issues

Foster families clearly declared that **they have to be capable of solving all the issues occurring in the course of fostering.** They however mentioned a case proving to be unmanageable: if one of the foster children endangers the others' psychological or physical health. Almost all of the respondents had a related story, referring mainly to two main cases: when the child has got a very severe disability (serious autism, psychiatric disease), and no professional support is available for the foster parent and the child in risky situations; and when the child has got serious mental or behavioural issues (ex. sexually abusing younger foster children).

Another common difficulty foster parents facing is the **lack of opportunities to go for a holiday**, to take some rest, since they don't have a substitute or respite carer, who would take care of the children during holiday.

**Foster parents are forced to develop their fostering competences on their own** – the 2x6 hours of yearly vocational training is not enough to continuously update their skills, even if the issues discussed during these events are relevant for their practice.

Half of the respondents have the opportunity to participate in a supervision haphazard, for the other half it's not available at all. As a result, **they struggle with the feeling of "left-alone"**, which in some geographical areas exasperated with the lack of professionals, services and supportive community. Only 20% of the respondents is a member of an informal self-help group.

### II.7.5 Financial aspects of foster parenting

All respondents agreed that **the allowance provided for covering the cost for the care of children is not sufficient**. *"We're keep accounts since we have to report about how we spent the money. It is always negative, with 15.000-20.000 HUF (50-65 Euro) minus per child in every month. In case of older children, the minus may be 25.000-30.000 HUF (75-100 Euro)."* *"The system itself is based on the assumption that you want to cheat, thus it's highly over-bureaucratized. It's not the child in the focus."* The **difference between the allowance and real costs are covered by foster parents** – in some cases it may reach a 50% own contribution. In case of higher costs – buying braces, glasses, furniture or a car – the wider family also contribute to the costs if they can afford it. Some respondents said that overspending should not be reported, thus *"the system makes you lie."* *The whole system is hypocrite, since not a small proportion of foster children lives below the subsistence level, and everybody knows it."*

There is also agreement, that **foster parents' home is frequently amortized** because of the increased wear and tear. Foster children are less able to take care of the furniture and of devices and equipment – they are not used to it or have never lived in such an environment. As a result, it's necessary to frequently change furniture and household appliances, as well as to renovate the house (at least to paint it) – however, **the service provider agencies do not cover these costs**.

Some of the respondents reported that **due to many years of foster parenting, they used up all their savings** resulting in a very serious financial situation, especially for those who live in disadvantaged regions where their property is unmarketable due to extremely low demand towards real estates. *"The allowance received after the children doesn't cover the costs of changing amortized devices. The allowance also doesn't cover the costs including clothing, schooling, etc. I have already spent all my saving, and when I'll become retired, I will have to stay in a big, amortized house."* *"To repair the damages caused by the children, there are sometimes tender sources, but it never adjusts to the needs, thus we have to pay it ourselves – however, the foster care consultant and the guardian require to have something in order"*.

The foster care benefit (provided for foster parents as a “remuneration”) is also judged as very low given that foster families have enormous responsibility and a 24/7 work schedule. A lot of respondents said this **benefit is “ridiculously”, “humiliatingly” low**, and they spend a part of the benefit to provide the own contribution necessary to cover the costs arising around the children. They see this as an important sign of the lack of appreciation – in fact, *“fostering is really not worth it.”*