

# Mental Health of Foster Children: Do Biological Fathers Matter?

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The high prevalence of mental health problems in foster children is well-documented (e.g., Armsden, Pecora, Payne, & Szatkiewicz, 2000; Tarren-Sweeney, 2008). From an ecological perspective, it can be expected that several factors in different systems (e.g., foster child, foster family, biological parents, and community) influence foster children's behavioral problems. Mainly, the influence of pre-care experiences, such as a history of maltreatment (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010), and in-care experiences, such as the number of out-of-home placements (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000), is investigated and confirmed. Although the body of research on predictive factors of foster children's behavioral problems is growing (McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010), the possible influence of one important party is being neglected:

biological fathers. This is remarkable given the central role of birth parents in family foster care (O'Donnell, 2001), and even more striking given the growing evidence of the influence of fathers on developmental outcomes of children (Lamb, 2010). This study reports on the involvement of birth fathers during foster care placement of their child and their association with the foster child's well-being. First, we review the literature on the influence of parents on foster children's mental health and discuss the limited research on fathers' involvement. Next, the results of our study are presented and discussed.

Research on the influence of parents on foster children's mental health mainly focuses on retrospective or unchangeable factors, such as history of maltreatment (Oswald et al., 2010) or psychiatric problems of the parent (Strijker & Knorth, 2009). From an ambiguous loss framework (Boss, 2004), it can, however, be understood that also their involvement during the foster placement has an impact. An ambiguous loss is defined as "a situation of unclear loss resulting from not knowing whether a loved one is dead or alive, absent or present" (Boss, 2004, p. 554). This type of loss is the most stressful, because it defies resolution and may freeze coping and grieving processes (Boss, 2004). Lee and Whiting (2007) show how this theoretical lens is also applicable to foster children's behavioral problems. A foster care placement usually does not mean a clear-cut "loss" of the parent. Parents are physically absent (to a certain degree), but kept psychologically present. The placement can raise questions about the identity of foster children as members of their family of origin and about the degree to which they are real foster family members (Samuels, 2009). Foster children, experiencing ambiguous loss, can have conflicting thoughts and feelings (e.g., feeling both love and anger for the lost person). Confusion about family boundaries and roles can also lead to loyalty conflicts (Boss, 1999; Moore, 2008).

Within this theoretical framework, the quality and amount of involvement of parents during foster placement may impact foster children's well-being. The more the child experiences the separation from the parent as ambiguous, the more problematic behaviors can be expected in the foster child (Moore, 2008). Leathers (2003), for example, found that maternal visiting was not directly related to behavioral problems of foster children, but was associated with greater loyalty conflict; this was, in turn, associated with more behavioral problems. Not just the visiting frequency, but also the parent's acceptance of the foster placement and the parent's relationship with the foster parents may impact the foster child's well-being. Research found that non-acceptance of the foster placement by the parents, especially the mother, impeded the foster child's adjustment to the foster family (Bakhuizen, 1998; Strijker & Knorth, 2009).

Bastiaensen (2001) argues that conflicts between parents and foster parents may induce a loyalty conflict in the foster child. Linares, Rhodes, and Montalto (2010) found a relationship characterized by conflict/triangulation to be predictive of both internalizing and externalizing problems of the foster child. We can, thus, conclude that there is some preliminary evidence for the influence of parental visiting arrangements, parent's attitude toward the foster placement, and parent-foster parent relationship on the mental health of foster children, at least with respect to the mothers. Less is known about the specific influence of fathers' involvement.

### **What Do We Know About the Fathers of Children in Foster Care?**

There is a significant lack of research examining fathers relative to mothers (Shapiro & Krysik, 2010). Most studies about biological fathers of children in foster care report only on their frequency of visiting with their child and their amount of involvement with the social worker. The percentages of fathers having no contact with their child vary from 31% (Perloff & Buckner, 1996) to 70% (Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006). Although there appears to be an important group of non-involved fathers, Perloff and Buckner (1996) reported that 41% of the fathers visited their child at least monthly. Data on fathers' amount of contact with caseworkers also show a significant group of non-involved fathers. Malm and Zielewski (2009) reported that 46% of fathers had never been in contact with the social worker. O'Donnell (2001) found that 68% of birth fathers had no contact with the caseworker during the past year, while this was only true for 11% of birth mothers. This lack of involvement may be, at least partly, explained by less efforts of the social worker to reach birth fathers. Birth fathers are often considered irrelevant to the child and the mother by the social worker (Strega et al., 2008). A study about the outreach of social workers toward parents (Franck, 2001) showed that the initial outreach to parents was greater for mothers than for fathers. This bias toward fathers is remarkable given "the growing body of literature

about the important roles that fathers can play in the lives of their children" (O'Donnell, 2001, p. 472).

Lamb (2010) indeed states that, in regular parenting situations, fathers influence their children's development both directly and indirectly. Studies on the involvement of nonresident fathers show that involvement is positively associated with children's academic success and negatively with children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Perloff and Buckner (1996) studied the impact of fathers' involvement on the well-being of children on welfare and found that contact with the father was negatively associated with internalizing and externalizing problems of the child. Although it could be expected that fathers' visiting frequency, attitude toward the placement and relationship with the foster parents impact the foster child's well-being, there is hardly no research on the effects of involving fathers (Sonenstein, Malm, & Billing, 2002). To our knowledge, only one study investigated just one element. Leathers (2003) reported that paternal visiting was not associated with emotional or behavioral problems of the foster child. Weterings and Van den Bergh (2010) reported that, during parent-child visits, the interactions between children and fathers were less problematic than those between children and mothers, and that mothers more often regarded the foster parents as rivals. These authors, however, did not investigate the association with the foster child's well-being. The association of fathers' involvement with foster children's well-being thus remains unclear.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this study was, firstly, to gain insight in the involvement of fathers in the foster placement of their child. More specifically, we were interested in the fathers' visiting frequency with their child, their attitudes toward the placement, and their relationships with the foster parents. Secondly, we hypothesized that the involvement of fathers was associated with foster children's well-being. We, therefore, investigated whether the above mentioned father variables

were associated with internalizing and externalizing problems of the foster child. Given the lack of previous research, this was examined in an exploratory way.

## Methods

### *Sample and Procedure*

The data used for this study were gathered as part of the Flemish governmental project "Strengthening Foster Parents in Parenting" (SFP). SFP offers additional training for foster parents of children between three and 18 years old with externalizing behavioral problems (Vanschoonlandt, Van Holen, & Vanderfaillie, 2012). In order to select and enroll eligible foster parents in training, a screening procedure was set up in all participating foster care agencies (16 out of 17 foster care agencies participated). Within these agencies, all new foster placements with a long-term perspective of children between three and 18 years old were screened. The screening was done during the fourth month after the start of the placement. The sample in this study involved all the foster placements that were screened during one year (October 2010–September 2011). Within this period, 280 new foster placements were initiated. Of these placements, 39 (13.9%) were already terminated at the moment of screening. Of the remaining 241 foster care placements, 194 foster parents (80.5%) and 219 foster care workers (90.9%) filled out the screening questionnaire. For 186 placements (77.2%), both questionnaires were filled out; only these were used. In 13 of the 186 foster care placements, the birth father had died. These cases were not included because no data could be provided about their current involvement.

### *Measures*

The foster care workers were surveyed about the involvement of the father. Foster parents were surveyed about the foster child's behavioral problems. The following questions/instruments were used:

- *Contact frequency with father.* Social workers were asked to indicate how often the child meets his/her father on average:

never, less than bi-monthly, bi-monthly, monthly, bi-weekly, weekly, or daily.

- *Father's attitude toward the placement.* Social workers were asked to rate the father's attitude toward this foster placement as positive, ambivalent or negative.
- *Quality of relationship between father and foster parents.* Social workers were asked to score the quality of the relationship between the father and the foster parents on a 5-point scale (1 = very conflictual, 5 = very good cooperation).
- *Foster child's behavioral problems.* Foster parents filled out a Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL/1,5-6-CBCL/6-18; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000, 2001). For 99 (for children younger than 6 years), or for 118 (for children over 6 years old), concrete behavioral, emotional, and social problems foster parents were asked to indicate how often these behaviors occur (0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, 2 = very true or often true). The instrument provides scores for some small-band scales and three broad-band scales. Since both versions are only comparable on the broad-band scales, only these were used. We only included internalizing problems and externalizing problems, because the total problems scale is dependent on the scores of the other broad-band scales. For these scales, raw scores were converted into normalized T-scores. These T-scores were used since it enables a joint analysis of both age versions of the CBCL and gives information about the level of problematic functioning. Achenbach and Rescorla (2000) suggest using a T-score  $\geq 60$  as a cutoff to discriminate children with from children without problems (i.e., the cut-off for borderline range).

The foster care workers also reported on some demographical variables that might be related to the foster child's behavioral problems: age, gender and number of previous out-of-home-placements of the foster child, type of foster placement (kinship/non-kinship), foster family composition (single parent/two-parent), and educational level of foster parents (higher educational degree or not).

### *Statistical Analyses*

First, descriptive analyses of the father variables of interest were carried out. Next, the univariate relationship between these variables and internalizing and externalizing behaviors of the foster child were examined. For nominal variables (i.e., father's attitude toward the placement with three categories) one-way ANOVA (and Tukey post-hoc test) was used. For scale variables (i.e., father's visiting frequency and the quality of the relationship between father and foster parents) a Pearson correlation was calculated. Although these father variables were not normally distributed, we used parametric statistics since Pearson  $r$  proves to be insensitive to violations of the assumption of normality (Havlicek & Peterson, 1976). Lastly, all three father variables were included in an ANCOVA. The above-described demographical variables that were significantly associated with foster child's internalizing or externalizing problems were also included in this analysis.

## **Results**

### *Characteristics of the Sample*

The final sample consisted of 173 foster care placements. A comparison of response and non-response group of foster parents was possible for variables included in the foster care worker's questionnaire, and did not reveal significant differences concerning the independent variables (father's visiting frequency, father's attitude of the placement, and father's relationship with the foster parents) or demographical variables (age, gender, and number of previous out-of-home placements of the foster child, the type of placement (kinship/non-kinship), foster family composition, and educational level of foster parents) (for all independent sample  $t$ -tests and all chi square tests with  $p > .05$ ). Since children's behavioral problems were measured in the foster parents' questionnaire, we could not detect the bias between response and non-response group for the dependent variable.

The sample of foster children consisted of 80 boys (46.2%) and 93 girls (53.8%), who were on average 9.77 years old ( $SD = 4.17$ ). The

mean duration of the foster care placement was 4.33 months ( $SD = 1.45$ ). For more than half of the children (54.3%), this foster placement was not the first out-of-home placement. Only a small number of foster children were placed with family of the father: 4% with a paternal aunt/uncle and 7.5% with paternal grandparents. A total of 35.1% of the foster children were placed with family of the mother: 9.8% with a maternal aunt/uncle, 23.1% with maternal grandparents, and 2.3% with other maternal family. Another 7.5% were placed with a sibling and 16.2% within the social network of the child or parents. The remaining foster children (29.5%) were placed in non-kinship foster families.

### ***Fathers' Involvement During Foster Placement of Their Child***

Table 1 gives an overview of the father variables of interest. Concerning the visiting frequency, there was an important group of fathers (42.8%) having no contact with their child, while there was an even bigger group of fathers (48%) who met their child at least monthly. With respect to the father's attitude toward the placement, the first striking finding was the high number of missing data. For 28.9% of the fathers, the social worker did not indicate the father's attitude toward this foster placement. In most of these cases (96%), it concerned fathers who had no contact with their child. The distribution of this variable was skewed, with more than half of the fathers (for whom the social worker knew their attitude) being positive toward the foster placement and only a very small number (10.6%) being negative.

Also concerning the relationship with the foster parents, there was a high number of missing data (38.2%). Again, in most of these cases (91%) the father had no contact with his child. When the social worker was able to rate the quality of this relationship, it was rated positive (score 4 or 5) in more than half of the cases (57.9%). The mean score for the quality of the relationship was 3.64 ( $SD = 1.19$ ). Only a very small number of fathers (19.7%) had a conflictual relationship (score 1 or 2) with the foster parents.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive analyses of the father variables

	Number	%	Valid %
<b>Visiting frequency</b>			
Never	74	42.8	
Less than bi-monthly	12	6.9	
bi-monthly	4	2.3	
Monthly	23	13.3	
bi-weekly	32	18.5	
Weekly	27	15.6	
Daily	1	.6	
<b>Attitude toward foster placement</b>			
Negative	13	7.5	10.6
Ambivalent	36	20.8	29.3
Positive	74	42.8	60.2
Missing	50	28.9	
<b>Relationship with foster parents</b>			
1 (very conflictual)	5	2.9	4.7
2	16	9.2	15
3	24	13.9	22.4
4	30	17.3	28
5 (very good cooperation)	32	18.5	29.9
Missing	66	38.2	

***Association of Fathers' Visiting Frequency, Attitude Toward the Placement, and Relationship with the Foster Parents with Foster Children's Behavioral Problems.***

Firstly, the association of the father variables with foster children's internalizing problems was investigated. A significant negative correlation was found between father's visiting frequency and foster child's internalizing problems ( $r = -.21, p = .007$ ). The one-way ANOVA test showed a significant association with father's attitude toward the placement ( $F(2, 120) = 5.76, p = .004$ ). Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for foster child's internalizing problems was significantly higher when the father was negative toward the placement ( $M = 63.15, SD = 10.78$ ) than when the father was ambivalent ( $M = 50.81, SD = 12.36, p = .003$ ) or positive ( $M = 53.46, SD = 10.82, p = .01$ ). The level of internalizing problems differed not between the group of fathers who were ambivalent or positive ( $p = .48$ ). Concerning the quality of the

relationship between father and foster parents, a significant negative correlation was found with foster child's internalizing problems ( $r = -.27, p = .005$ ).

Since none of the other variables (age, gender and number of previous out-of-home placements of the foster child, type of foster placement, foster family composition, and educational level of foster parents) were significantly associated with foster child's internalizing problems, only the father variables were entered in the ANCOVA. This resulted in a significant model ( $F(3, 102) = 3.67, p = .02$ ) that explained approximately 13% of the variance ( $R^2 = .13$ ). Only the quality of the father-foster parent relationship remained significant in explaining foster child's internalizing behaviors (See Table 2).

**Table 2**

Results of ANCOVA with all the father variables

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Father's visiting frequency	89.51	1	89.51	.71	.40
Father's attitude toward the foster placement	453.09	2	226.55	1.81	.17
Father-foster parent relationship	493.38	1	493.38	3.94	.05
Error	12664.45	101	125.391		
Total	321999.0	106			

The same analyses were done for foster child's externalizing behavior as dependent variable. However, none of the father variables was significantly associated with the foster child's externalizing behavior.

## Discussion

Fathers are a neglected group in research on child well-being in the general population (Lamb, 2010) and even more in the case of children in need of an out-of-home placement (Sonenstein et al., 2002). This study showed that fathers were often a neglected party in social work practice, but at the same time the study demonstrated the association of fathers' involvement with foster children's well-being.

A first important finding was the high number of missing data concerning the father's attitude toward the foster placement. In 29% of the cases, the foster care worker did not indicate whether the father was positive or not toward this placement. This is a high number, given that all these fathers were still alive. It is possible that these fathers were unknown to the biological mother, or had been absent for a long time before the foster care placement, and could therefore not be contacted by the social worker. Our results indeed showed that the missing data were mainly about fathers who had no contact with their child. Another interpretation is that biological fathers are neglected by social workers. Research on outreach of social workers (Franck, 2001) indeed showed that casework activity levels were higher for mothers than for fathers. Also, findings of qualitative research on discourses about fathers support this interpretation. Storhaug and Øien (2012), for example, found that fathers' experiences with child welfare services could most often be framed within the discourses "father as a threat" or "father as irrelevant." Strega and colleagues (2008) reported that 60% of the fathers were considered as irrelevant or as a risk for children. Only 20% of the social workers considered the father as an asset for the child. Within these discourses it is not surprising that the father's attitude toward the placement was not known by the social worker at the moment of the study (i.e., four months after the start of the placement). It can be hypothesized that involving fathers is not a high priority for the social worker at this early stage of a long-term foster placement.

Data on the father-child visiting frequency showed a mixed picture of the father's involvement. While 43% of the fathers never met their child, 48% of them met their child at least monthly. These findings are in line with other studies: Weterings and Van den Bergh (2010) reported that 38% of the fathers never saw their child and Perloff and Buckner (1996) reported that 41% saw their child monthly. Our results showed that if the fathers were involved, they were highly present in the child's life. When only taking the fathers into account who visited their child, 84% of them visited at least monthly. Also, based on the other information, the picture of the

fathers was quite positive. There was only a small group of fathers who were negative toward the foster placement (10.6%) or who had a bad relationship with the foster parents (19.7%).

This study was one of the first to investigate the association of fathers' current involvement with foster children's well-being. All three father variables were significantly associated with foster children's internalizing problems. When taking all these variables into account, however, only the father-foster parent relationship was significantly associated with foster children's internalizing problems. Sanchirico and Jablonka (2000) state that parental visits may reduce a sense of abandonment and feelings of grief or depression that can accompany an out-of-home placement. Frequent visits with fathers were, in our study, indeed associated with less internalizing problems. Research on the influence of visits of mothers do not, however, consistently report positive effects on the foster child's well-being (McWey et al., 2010). Leathers (2003) states that the varying effect of mother-child visiting frequency might be explained by a process of loyalty conflicts. The finding that visiting frequency was not associated with foster children's internalizing behaviors when the quality of the father-foster parent relationship was taken into account may indicate that also for visits of fathers, not the frequency, but mainly the quality and meaning of these visits are important. We also found that when fathers were negative toward the placement, foster children had more internalizing behaviors, even in a problematic range (the mean T-score was above a borderline cut-off score). When the quality of the father-foster parent relationship was taken into account, this variable was also no longer significant. Apparently, the father's attitude toward the placement is not important as long as his collaboration with the foster parents is good (despite his disapproval of the placement). These results are in line with research that found that foster care placements where the father is negative toward the placement and has conflicts with the foster parents, could place the foster child in a conflict of loyalty (Bakhuizen, 1998; Bastiaensen, 2001). These findings can also be explained within the "ambiguous loss" framework. A foster placement can be considered as an "ambiguous

loss" of the father (McWey et al., 2010) when he is physically absent, but is psychologically present for the child (Leathers, 2003). This may be very much the case when the father lets the child feel that he does not agree with this foster placement (by having conflicts with foster parents). Lee and Whiting (2007) described how this ambiguous loss can be accompanied by feelings of confusion, hopelessness, guilt, and anxiety in foster children.

Although it was expected that foster children could also express distress concerning the lack of contact with the father, a negative attitude of the father toward the placement or conflicts between the father and foster parents by externalizing behaviors (e.g., anger, tantrums) (Lee & Whiting, 2007), no associations were found.

This study was one of the first to investigate the association of fathers' visiting frequency, attitude toward the placement, and relationship with the foster parents and foster children's behavioral problems in a large group of foster children. Another asset of this study was the homogeneity in duration of the foster placement. All the participants were surveyed during the fourth month of the foster placement. We can therefore say that the involvement of fathers is associated with less internalizing problems in the foster children at the early stages of a foster placement. This finding cannot, however, be generalized to foster placements with a longer duration. Fanshel and Shinn (1978), for example, found that foster children who had been in foster care for five years or longer and were still visited by their parents had more difficulties in adapting to the foster placement than unvisited children. A longitudinal follow-up study of this sample would give more insight in the father's impact at later stages of the foster placement. Another limitation is that only indirect information about the fathers was collected. Leathers (2003) noted that social workers and foster parents in her study did not even agree on visiting frequency—an objective variable. It is therefore possible that surveying foster parents and fathers about fathers' visiting frequency, attitude toward the placement, and relationship with the foster parents would lead to different results. Furthermore, the data used for this study were collected as part of a more extensive survey and were

therefore measured with minimal questions. It would, however, have been interesting to have measured the concept of loyalty conflict directly or to have used a multi-item scale to measure the quality of the father-foster parent relationship. Future studies should also aim at determining the cause of missing data. We do not know whether these were caused because of non-identification of the biological father, because of a lack of outreach of social workers toward fathers or because of non-response of fathers to the outreach of foster care workers. More information would give more insight in how the current practice can be ameliorated (e.g., encouraging social workers to actively attend to fathers, developing good practices for keeping fathers involved).

The results of this study showed that fathers do matter. Given that mainly the father-foster parent relationship was associated with the foster child's internalizing problems, improving this relationship should be a main focus. Foster care workers should address with fathers how they can establish a good collaboration with the foster parents, although they may not agree with this foster placement. The importance of the relationship between parents and foster parents has led to the development of programs to improve this cooperation (for example: Linares, Montalto, Li, & Oza, 2006). The evaluation of the program of Linares et al. (2006), however, showed that only 16% of the biological parents attended the co-parenting sessions and only 11% of the biological fathers participated in the program. Thus, efforts should be made to tailor such programs to the specific needs of fathers. Moreover, foster parents may also need extra support in establishing a good relationship with the father of the foster child. Given that foster care workers often view fathers as irrelevant or as a threat (Storhaug & Øien, 2012), this may also be the case for foster parents. In this respect, a shift in discourses about fathers is necessary: fathers should be considered as (possibly) valuable parties during out-of-home placements of children. Next, the father-child interaction during foster care visits can be enhanced using existing programs (for example, Haight et al., 2005). Lastly, the high number of missing data concerning the father's attitude toward the placement

may indicate that involving fathers in the placement is not a high priority during the first months of a foster placement. Especially when the father was already nonresident before the foster care placement this requires a special effort of the foster care worker. This problem can be addressed using the program developed by the US National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (Howard, 2010). This program might prove useful in other countries.

To conclude, we can state that this study demonstrated that fathers matter for foster children's well-being and calls for more attention for this often neglected party.

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