

The Views and Opinions of Biological Families, Foster Families and Social Workers about Children's Contact with Birth Parents

Wednesday, 3rd October @ 17:30: Poster Sessions & Coffee Break (Venue: Salão Nobre)

Dr. Maria D. Salas (University of Málaga), Dr. Isabel M. Bernedo (University of Málaga), Prof. María J. Fuentes (University of Málaga), Dr. Miguel A. García-Martín (University of Málaga), Dr. F. Javier Fernández Baena (University of Málaga)

It is generally agreed that contact visits with birth families are important both for the foster child's wellbeing and for ensuring that the foster placement is successful. However, the benefits and potential disadvantages of contact visits for children in family foster care have been the subject of much debate and controversy in recent decades (Quinton, Selwyn, Rushton, & Dance, 1999; Prasad, 2011; Selwyn, 2004). So, there is a need for continued research to provide fresh evidence and compare it with existing findings. The views and opinions of those involved can provide useful information regarding how such visits might be improved. In order to this, the present study analyzes the opinions of birth families, foster families and social workers responsible for supervising contact visits regarding the benefits and problems associated with contact visits. The sample for this study comprised 23 birth families, eight social workers and nine foster families. In the case of biological parents, semistructured individual interviews were conducted in order to explore the parents' opinions regarding the contact visits and the main areas they felt needed improving. Regarding foster families and social workers, data were gathered through two focus groups, comprising both participants, respectively. As in the case of biological families, the analysis applied considered their views regarding the benefits and problems associated with visits, as well as their proposals for how they might be improved. Transcriptions of the parents' interviews and of the two focus groups were examined using an inductive method and ATLAS.ti v7.0 software to identify themes among participants' responses. The findings showed that, in the case of the birth parents, the main themes to emerge concerned their general view of contact visits, the input and support from social workers, the contribution of foster families, the contact venue, and the organization of visits. In general, when comparing the results about the opinion manifested by the participants, it is worth highlighting the positive view that biological families show regarding support they received from social workers and saw the relationship as being based on mutual trust. More specifically, they felt that the social workers, were prepared to answer questions, and made them feel welcome when they attend the visits. However, social workers and foster families put forward the need of providing birth families with more information, preparation and support. Another proposals put forward by foster carers for improving contact visits concerned the importance of a collaborative relationship between the birth family and foster carers, the need for greater preparation of foster children and adapting visits to the specific needs of each child. The results suggest several ways to improve social work practice. For example, is necessary to develop a specific program aimed at providing birth families, foster carers and foster children with adequate training in relation to contact visits.