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Biological children as participants in foster families

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In this article, we aim to provide insight into the experiences of biological children in foster families, in terms of their participation and involvement in the foster home. The article is based on an in-depth qualitative study of four children aged 11 to 14 years and four ‘adult children’ aged 22 to 30 years. This unique approach presents a comprehensive picture of growing up with foster siblings, including the ‘here-and-now’ perspective of children presently living in foster families, and the ‘looking back’ perspective of the ‘adult children’. Both groups perceived themselves as active participants in the early phases of the foster family. They felt involved in the family planning to invite a foster child, and they engaged with warmth and care in the everyday life with the foster sibling. In retrospect the adult children recollected more about the conflicts and strains of growing up in a foster families, especially in periods when the foster child needed much attention, or in case of unplanned removal of the foster sibling. They then felt excluded and that they had to cope with loss and sorrow alone. Despite this, three of the four adult children were planning to become a foster family themselves. The informants had not experienced support from the child protection services (CPS). We conclude that more research is needed to develop knowledge about biological children’s benefits and risks when growing up in foster families, about participation in the foster family life, and about participation in contact with the CPS.

Keywords: child protection, biological children in foster care, children’s participation, foster care, foster sibling

Introduction

In Norway, there is a strong belief that a child’s needs for care, security and love is best provided for by the child’s biological family. Early intervention, prevention and support are priority areas for child protection services (CPS) in Norway. Foster care is defined as a way of organizing care for children in the public sector, where foster homes are private homes that take children in and bring them up (Goody 1982; Ulvik 2007). According to the legislation in Norway, the CPS are responsible for placing children in public care (Child Welfare Act 1992,

revised 2003, 2014). At the end of 2015, 10 360 children in Norway were placed in foster homes, representing 70 per cent of children in public care (Statistics Norway 2015a). Statistics Norway does not have statistics on how many biological children who are part of foster families (2015b). The child welfare legislation regulates the foster care provision (Child Welfare Act 1992, 2003, 2014). The CPS in each municipality organise the foster care, and is responsible for recruiting and training foster parents, and for placing and monitoring foster children and their parents. The CPS are also responsible for giving guidance and support to the foster child and the foster parents in the placement period, with a duty to follow up through regular visits. The Child Welfare Act do not mention that biological children in foster families have participatory rights in contact with CPS. They are not included in the placement process, in recruitment of foster families or in the regular support and visits. It is up to each local municipal CPS to support the biological children in the family and give them opportunities to participate.

In cases where CPS have taken over the care of a child, the child and/or the family often have major, complex problems and the family has often already received help from CPS (Clausen and Kristofersen 2008; Høstmælingen, Kjørholt and Sandberg 2008). Children in foster homes have often experienced lack of care over time, and they may have comprehensive need for security, attention, support and care. This presents a major challenge to the foster family and can affect the childhood of the biological children in the family. Another challenge is that a large number of foster families experience discontinuity due to unplanned move of a foster child, and between 20 and 50 per cent of foster children are subject to one or more unintended moves (Backe-Hansen, Christiansen and Havik 2013; Ødegård, Lohne and Willumsen 2015). Many foster parents and their biological children have their daily lives changed for better or worse, it is therefore of interest to gain insight into the situation for the biological children, and into how their opportunities for participation in the foster home are safeguarded.

In this article, we discuss the findings of a study based on interviews with biological children in foster families about their experiences of growing up with foster siblings in Norway. The article discusses children's and young people's experiences of involvement and participation in the foster home, both within the family and in contact with CPS. The following research questions form the basis for the discussion: How do the biological children perceive their involvement and participation in the foster family? How do they perceive their participation in their contact with CPS?

Limited focus and research on the wellbeing of biological children

In a scoping review, Sebrinski and Shlonsky (2014) observe that there is much research internationally on foster children and foster parents, but few studies of how biological children in foster families perceive their upbringing. They only found 46 articles representing 39 research studies published between 1980 and 2012. The reviewed studies, coming from USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa and Europe, were based on small non-representative samples. Sebrinski and Shlonsky therefore conclude that little is known about sons/daughters of foster parents, and that the research still is at an exploratory stage. They also comment that research on *participation* of biological children in foster homes has received little attention. We will present results from some of the few studies that exist on biological children's experiences, including some studies on parental perceptions of their children's situation. These are mostly qualitative studies with few samples, carried out in Africa, Australia, Canada, UK, USA, Sweden and Norway, and published between 2000 and 2016.

Several studies show that the biological children display engagement and serve as good role models for foster siblings, and that they care for their foster siblings, as well as for their biological siblings and parents (Brannen, Heptinstall and Bhopal 2000; Höjer and Nordenfors 2006; Twigg and Swan 2007; Fox 2011; Sutton and Stack 2013; Knutsen 2014; Nordenfors 2015). In studies interviewing biological children about their family's motive for becoming a foster family, most children answer that they want to help children who have problems. The children see their own family as a good family and are willing to share their parents and family activities, as well as their toys and even bedrooms with foster children (Fox 2000; Watson and Jones 2002; Nuske 2005). Other studies however, have showed that biological children also have negative experiences; for example sharing their parents' attention with foster siblings or watching their parents being tired because of a foster sibling needing care and attention (Nuske 2005; Nordenfors 2006; Twigg and Swan 2007; Knutsen 2014).

We have found only four studies that examine biological children's participation in foster care. Sutton and Stack (2013) and Knutsen (2014) show that children perceive foster care as teamwork carried out together with their parents. Nordenfors (2006, 2015) found that children perceived their upbringing with foster siblings to be positive when they could see themselves as negotiators with potential to influence their own situation. Ellingsen and Øyre (2016), who have interviewed adults with experience from growing up with a foster sibling,

found that the adults in hindsight believed that participation would have been important in order to master everyday life in the family. They missed information about the foster child, about what foster care work entailed, and about the changes it would mean for them and their family.

Some studies show that the biological children did not feel that the CPS viewed them as participants in the foster home. The children wanted the CPS to listen to them and include them in decisions that would affect their everyday life (Fox 2001; Höjer 2001; Nordenfors 2006, 2015; Heggdalsvik 2007; Twigg and Swan 2007; Younes and Harp 2007; Knutsen 2014; Roche and Noble-Carr 2016; Targowska, Cavazzi and Lund 2016).

In other studies foster parents reported that their biological children are generally happy to share their family with a foster sibling. They believe that the negative experiences, such as sharing parents' attention and making allowances for children with need for care and attention, have a positive effect because their sons/daughters develop ability to show empathy and understanding for other people's situations (Twigg 1994; Höjer 2001; Watson and Jones 2002; Nordenfors 2006; Younes and Harp 2007; Dean, Jayna and Noble-Carr 2014).

Theoretical framework: children's participation

Modern-day sociology of childhood stresses that childhood must be viewed as a phase in which children live their lives, and not just as a transitional phase in which children become socialized into adult life (Corsaro 2015). All children should be perceived as active *subjects* with the opportunity to participate in creating their own lives. Children should be understood *both* as 'beings' living in the here and now, and as 'becomings' with a view to the future. Recognizing children as participants does not conflict with understanding them also as vulnerable and dependent on their parents and other adults throughout their childhood. Applying a *socio-cultural perspective*, we understand children as subjects who are involved and embedded in the social context of their everyday life (Bruner 1990; Gulbrandsen 1998). Children participate and negotiate to create meaning from the situations they are involved in together with their family, other adults, siblings, foster siblings and friends (Mannion 2007; Nordenfors 2007; Gulbrandsen, Seim and Ulvik 2012). We see children's participation on the basis that they are included in *relationships* within their family, and with other children and adults (Mannion 2007; Backe-Hansen 2009; Clark 2010).

The recognition of children as subjects is the basis for children having human rights, as stipulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989). Children have the right to family life, to protection and the right to participate: to be involved in and have a say in matters that concern their own lives. These rights apply to *all children* in Norway, both in their own family and in other contexts, and they are enshrined in Norwegian law through incorporation of the UNCRC (The Children Act 1981 [2013, 2014]; UNCRC 1989; Seim and Slettebø 2007). Within this perspective, biological children in foster families have the right to participation in their own family, i.e. the foster family that forms the framework for their childhood. In addition, biological children in foster families are part of the foster care placement, and as such, decisions by CPS will have an impact on their lives. The biological children's right to participate should therefore include participation in contact with the CPS. In the Child Welfare Act (2003, 2014), the right to participate is only prescribed for children who receive help from these services, i.e. foster children, not for the biological children in the foster family.

Participation is a wide concept covering several levels and theoretical perspectives. Hart (1992) and Shier (2001) have developed models for understanding children's participation based on Article 12 (UNCRC, 1989). These models are designed to understand children as subjects and active participants within their own family, in contact with institutions like schools and CPS, and as citizens in their community (Hart 1992). Both Hart and Shier are referring to Arnstein's concept of participation as partnership in her classic article 'A ladder of citizen participation' (Arnstein 1969). Arnstein stresses that the power to have influence marks the main difference between participation as *tokenism*: situations where people are being listened to, consulted or giving advice; and to participation as *partnership*: situations where they are also involved in decision-making processes and where decisions are open to negotiation.

Shier's model includes five levels of participation for children: 1) to be listened to, 2) to be supported in expressing their views, 3) to have their views taken into account, 4) to be involved in decision-making processes, and 5) to share power and responsibility for decision-making. In Shier's model, only levels 4 and 5 can be classed as participation as *partnership*. Talking with children and listening to their views is necessary, but not sufficient to qualify as participation. In a child rights perspective, only partnerships where children are involved in negotiations and have influence qualify as participation as partnership (Shier 2001).

The socio-cultural perspective and the rights perspective of participation complement each other and form the basis for analysis of children's participation, both within the foster family and in their contact with CPS. We view children as active subjects, as *embedded* in social situations and relationships in which they understand and create meaning together with their parents and others, and as subjects with a *right* to participation.

Method

Collection of data

In the study, we have employed in-depth qualitative interviews with eight informants (four children and four 'adult children') with experience of growing up as a biological child in a foster family. The purpose of using both children and adult children as informants was to elicit narratives about growing up with foster siblings told from different time perspectives. The interviews with the *children* showed how they, in their present situation, experience their everyday life and their opportunities for participation. The *adult children's* responses provided insight into their experiences and perceptions seen in hindsight. Both perspectives capture the children's reflections and provide knowledge on childhood experiences with foster siblings

For ethical reasons we were not allowed to contact biological children in foster families directly. Selection of informants was carried out in cooperation with the Governmental run Children's Welfare System, and with Children's and Adolescents' Mental Health Services (CAMS). The informants' foster families have received support from these institutions, which may mean that their foster families have had more challenges than other foster families.

Our intention was to have a small sample of approximately eight informants, and the criteria for selecting informants were biological children who presently lived in, or had grown up in foster families, and who were old enough to reflect over their experiences. Professional practitioners in the two institutions invited six adult children and the parents of eight children who filled the criteria for participation in the study. Four children aged 11-14, three girls and one boy, and four adult children aged 20-30, two women and two men, agreed to take part. For ethical reasons we could not contact the other eight and ask why they did not want to participate. The narratives in this study represent a small section of biological children in foster homes, and other children may have other experiences of growing up in foster families.

The informants were aged 9–20 when their foster sibling moved in, they had lived with foster siblings between one and seven years, and some had shared their family with several foster siblings. Five also had biological siblings in their family. The informants were living in small rural villages that allow for close contact with other family members and friends. They tell about an active everyday life with many interests and activities.

We chose semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews as a methodical approach. The first author conducted the interviews. She encouraged the informants to speak openly about their everyday life experiences, seen from their own perspective. The interview guide included a list of 17 questions, but the interviewer only used them if the informant did not cover them in their own stories. Examples of questions are: Why did your family decide to become a foster family? Can you tell what your daily life in the family is like, how you experience having a foster sibling in your family? Is the life in the foster family how you expected it to be? Can you tell about what you think have been the positive aspects of growing up with a foster sibling, and is there anything that has been difficult? Is there anything you wanted to be different? Each interview lasted between one and two hours.

Ethics

The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the study. Participation in interviews was voluntary. All informants consented to take part, and in addition, the parents consented for children who were under 18. We have anonymized all recognisable identifiers relating to the children and adults, all names in the text are fictitious, and text is adapted to protect the participants' anonymity. We have named the four children Nina, Johan, Mari and Kari; and named the four adult children Silje, Siv, Kjetil and Geir. In the presentation of findings, the informant's age at the time of the interview is shown in parentheses. In order to meet NSD's requirements on privacy protection of third parties, we have omitted details about foster siblings when transcribing the interviews.

Analysis

The informants were not asked direct questions about their experiences of participation; their narratives about everyday life form the basis for the analysis of their involvement and participation. The analysis was first conducted as an inductive analysis (Malterud 2011) through close reading, densification of meaning, and categorisation of the informants'

descriptions and reflections on their experiences. In connection with this article, a second content analysis focused more closely what the informants on their own initiative told about their experiences of involvement in everyday life. The analysis is also theoretically informed by analytical questions generated from the theoretical framework: Did the informants appear as *subjects* participating in the foster family? Were they involved in relationships and did they participate in negotiations and co-creation in everyday life in the family? Viewed in a child rights perspective, were they involved in decision-making processes in the family and in the contact with CPS? Can we understand their experiences of involvement and participation as tokenism or partnership?

The analysis revealed that the informants had different experiences with participation and involvement during three distinct phases in the life of the foster family: an *initial phase*, a *shaping of everyday life phase*, and a *final phase* in the cases where the foster sibling was removed from the family's care. These three phases form the framework for the presentation of the children's and the adult children's participation and involvement in the foster home.

Findings

Participation in the initial phase

The informants considered themselves as involved in the decision-making process and in the preparation of the foster home. All told that their family discussed at length the motive for becoming a foster family, and talked about what this would imply for the family. They reported being involved in the decision-making process together with their parents.

In the analysis, two different pictures emerge of the children's motives for wanting their family to be a foster family. One motive was a wish to have siblings and to have a bigger family. Johan (12), who was an only child, wanted a little brother, so that he would always have someone to play with at home, and told that he made it a condition that he would be the oldest child in the family. His parents supported him, and after a short wait, Johan became a big brother when his six-year-old foster brother moved in with the family. Geir (30), an only child aged 12 when the matter was discussed in the family, recalled that his motive was to have a bigger family, partly so that he could have some 'breathing space' from his parents' watchful gaze: 'Our family would be bigger, so I would get nagged less.'

A second motive was to provide care for a child who needed it. Siv (26), who was 20 years old at the time and her 16-year-old sister, proposed to their parents that they should

become a foster family. She described it as follows: ‘We saw that Mum and Dad had more to give. We were adults, but they were still healthy and spritely. We are an inclusive family and that was why we thought we would contribute something.’ Kjetil (28), who was 16 when the matter was discussed, was initially sceptical about the family taking in a foster child, but changed his mind when he understood the gravity of his new foster brother’s situation: ‘Then Mum told me about his background, and I said: “Let’s just do it.” And that’s how it came about.’ International studies also show that helping children who need a home is a common motive (Fox 2000; Watson and Jones 2002; Nuske 2005; Twigg and Swan 2007).

The *preparation* phase was characterised by excitement and expectations. The children told how they were looking forward to meeting their new foster sibling and were anxious about who it would be. Mari was apprehensive about whether her foster sister would feel at home with the family: ‘I was excited about what she would look like. Whether she would accept Mum as her mum and me as her sister, or if she would just miss her own mother.’ The time that the families had to make preparations varied. Siv, her sister and parents had only a few hours to prepare for the new family member, and were keen for her to feel welcome:

‘It was a matter of urgency... Sofie was collected from school that day, and arrived with two people from the child protection services. ...We quickly put together an album about our family and about who we were, so Mum and Dad could give it to Sofie. She could then get to know us a bit through the album.’

Through their narratives about how the family made the decision to become a foster family, and how they prepared themselves, the children emerge as active subjects, with their own motives and wishes for shaping the foster care activities. They also relate that their parents listened to their points of view and wishes. From a socio-cultural perspective, these discussions are understood as negotiations in the close relationships within the family (Bruner 1990). The words they used indicate that the children perceive themselves as active participants in preparing for the arrival of the new family member. Siv said ‘We quickly put together an album’ and Johan said ‘We painted his room yellow’. We will describe the process in the initial phase of the foster home as a *partnership* between parents and children, based on Hart’s (1992) and Shier’s (2001) concept of participation, even if the children’s degree of involvement in the actual decision-making varies.

Participation in the shaping of everyday life

Once preparations were finished, the family moved into a phase in which everyday life had to be adapted to accommodate the new family member. The children's narratives about everyday life reveal their participation in this phase as 1. *Negotiations on roles and relationships*, 2. *Care and engagement*, and 3. *Tackling the challenges and responsibilities of everyday life with the foster siblings*.

Participation in negotiations on roles and relations

Whom and how should we be towards each other? Because foster siblings do not have a defined position in the family through kinship, there are no cultural rules that tell how foster children should be included in a family (Nordenfors 2006; Ulvik 2007). Nonetheless, biological children in our study seem to perceive the relationship with the foster children as natural and familial. In most of the narratives, the biological children perceived the foster child as a permanent family member. For example, Mari (13) said 'I can't imagine what it would be like without her in the family now. She is part of the family now and my sister.' When Mari's four-year-old foster sister chose to call her foster mother 'mum' just two days after moving in, Mari was initially surprised, but soon understood: '...and I think it was because the rest of us did. She wanted to fit in.' Johan (12) said 'I remember one time when Lasse said to me that we are almost like brothers. I liked hearing that. I thought that too – we are almost like brothers.'

The children were actively involved in negotiations about new roles and relationships. They showed sensitivity and understanding for the foster child to take the initiative in deciding what they should call each other, and what the relationship should entail. Geir (30) told for example that his foster sister's children call him *uncle* and his children call her *aunt*. Most of the children saw their foster siblings as an important part of their own family, while at the same time saying that they understood that their foster sibling was on loan, and that the foster siblings' own biological family may be important to them. Both the children and the adult children said that their foster siblings were included as members of the extended family, and they found it natural that they took part in activities and celebrations in family gatherings.

Participation in care and engagement

Most informants described their relationship with their foster siblings as loving and caring, indicating that they had formed emotional attachments to their foster siblings. Johan says, 'The thing about Lasse is that he has a heart of gold.' They presented their relationship with

their foster siblings as meaningful for them, and some described warmly how their longing for a sister or brother ended when a foster sibling moved in. Their accounts of incidents involving quarrelling and teasing, as is usual among siblings, show that the relationship between their foster siblings and themselves is close. The informants empathized with the situation of their foster siblings and worried about them in various ways. They took the initiative to care for them by giving practical help and showing patience and understanding when their foster siblings were struggling. These narratives show that the biological children perceived themselves as subjects and agents; they took initiative to treat their foster siblings in an inclusive manner, in other words as *active care-giving participants* vis-à-vis the foster child. We can regard the children's experiences of care as notions of relationships, connectedness and a desire to create a sense of well-being in others (Brannen, Heptinstall and Bhopal 2000).

That biological children in the foster home are showing care and engagement towards their foster siblings corresponds well with findings in other research (Höjer and Nordenfors 2006; Twigg and Swan 2007; Fox 2011; Suttén and Stack 2013; Knutsen 2014; Nordenfors 2015; Roche and Noble-Carr 2016).

Participation: challenges and responsibilities

Childhood in the foster family is presented differently when described from a simultaneous or from a retrospective perspective. The children who were currently living together with foster siblings described their everyday life as a normal family situation, and did not tell about problems sharing time or parental attention with the foster child. Nina (11) said 'Mum talks a lot more on the phone when someone is living here. Then I have to wait until she is finished, and that can be irritating sometimes. That's about it. However, several children said that over time they could find the situation tiring because their foster siblings needed a lot of support in everyday life. Mari (13) said, 'before we became a foster home, I just thought that is fine, but now I can see that it is a job as well.'

Looking back on their childhood, the adult children reflected more on personal costs of sharing their parents' attention and care with foster siblings, and having parents who were not available at times. They recalled having responsibilities that affected ordinary family life negatively. One of them described the foster home as 'a 24-hour risk project'. Nevertheless, they showed that they understood why their parents gave them less time and attention, and

they described various strategies for dealing with these difficulties. Kjetil (28) said that he had missed having time alone with his parents:

‘Earlier I could speak with my parents about anxieties and joys there and then, but when he became part of the family, they had to set aside time for me. Earlier I didn’t have to wait until the time suited to discuss things with my parents.’

The strategy they adopted was for him and the parents to have time alone one evening a week, without his foster brother. This time was valuable, because then they could talk about their own experiences, or discuss how they could help the foster child. Others said that they avoided talking to their parents about their difficulties. Silje saw it like this: ‘I didn’t want to say anything to Mum and Dad about how I felt. I didn’t want to be a nuisance and I thought that it would pass, but it didn’t.’ She told how she found a caring person within the extended family: ‘Luckily I had an uncle who I spoke to a lot, because I found things a bit difficult.’ She mentioned her uncle as one of the reasons she looks back on her childhood with fondness.

The adult children were worried that their parents were exhausted. They felt sad, and found it difficult at times when the foster child had a special need that had to be followed-up by the parents, or exhibited problematic behaviour. Geir (30) described, for example, how he avoided difficult situations ‘I kept out of the way and didn’t take sides with anyone, they did their thing and I did mine.’ Another informant told that she was angry with her foster sister, whose behaviour made her parents tired and upset. The adult children realized in hindsight that the work was demanding, and said that they shielded their parents when they felt they were exhausted, for example by including their foster siblings in activities and trips. Some said they did this on their own initiative, while others described that they experienced that the parents at times pressured them to find activities for their foster siblings.

They kept their own problems and thoughts to themselves, and felt that they had to cope alone with the challenges that arose. Siv (26) put it like this: ‘I wish they had talked to us more, because it affected the whole family. Our parents came and told us about the advice they had been given’. The children’s narratives show that they perceived the scope for participation as limited, and that they were on the side-lines when difficult situations arose.

Both the younger children and the adult children had experienced that their parents gradually discussed the family’s foster home less and less with them, and that they did not include them in the foster care partnership as they had at the beginning. Initially the whole

family was involved in deciding how everyday life would function best for everyone. When some time had passed and new daily routines in the family were accepted, there was less discussion of this. Kari (14) said that her parents gradually used other sources of knowledge to understand her foster sister's behaviour and needs.

As mentioned before, other studies also refer to personal cost of growing up with foster siblings (Nordenfors 2006; Twigg and Swan 2007, Knutsen 2014). The study by Brannen, Heptinstall, and Bhopal (2000), shows that children display care and sensitivity with respect to how their parents are coping with everyday life, and the study by Nuske (2006), found that biological children in particular supported their mothers when they saw that they were exhausted.

The CPS do not relate much to the biological children in foster homes, but two of the adult children recalled that CPS had given them special tasks. Kjetil (28) was 16 years old when his eight-year-old foster brother moved in. He found it natural to share the daily life with him, and to take care of him. Kjetil's foster brother was very fond of him and wanted to be with him, but in time, Kjetil found it draining to have someone always tagging along. The CPS regarded Kjetil as a resource person, and offered him payment for acting as a befriender for his foster brother. Looking back, Kjetil could see that this had not been a good solution, and recognized more clearly his own needs at that time: 'It didn't really function as intended. I felt forced to go out and do something, but finding things to do in a little countryside village was not always easy.' Silje (20) was ten years old when her 11-year-old foster sister moved in. The foster sister had major problems and Silje felt great responsibility for her wellbeing. The CPS asked Silje to report any irregularities concerning her foster sister, for example at a time when the latter was experimenting with drugs. Silje was thus assigned a double role in relation to her foster sister – to be both a sister and an inspector for the public welfare system. She found her role difficult because her foster sister told her secrets in confidence, secrets which were often of such a nature that she had to tell her parents, who then reported to CPS.

Kjetil and Silje both felt that the CPS had given them difficult double roles, roles that created problems in the relationship with their foster brother or sister. Kjetil received payment for helping his foster brother, and Silje recalls that the CPS promised her payment, but that no payment was made. It appears to be little or no other research discussing this kind of practice by the CPS.

Participation in the final phase?

Several informants experienced that the foster child moved out earlier than initially planned, either because he or she wished to move, or because the CPS had decided this, while the foster parents wanted the foster child to continue living in the home. Kjetil (28) describes this experience in the following way:

‘It was just awful. It was sad. There were lots of arguments between the child protection services and my mother. ...I tried to support my mother. We had to accept some difficult compromises. I had thought that he would always be with us, and even imagined Christmases in the future when he was an adult, and what that would be like.’

Foster siblings who moved out often left a void in the family. Nina (11) said ‘It was kind of strange here. There was no one at the dinner table, and no one that I had to lock the toilet door for. It was all a bit strange.’ The children felt a loss that they did not talk to their parents about, and they had many unanswered questions, especially related to caring about the child who had moved out. Nina told:

‘I think about how it was for him on Christmas Eve. Did he miss us? Was he thinking about us? I wonder what he is doing now. What kind of friends does he have? Is he getting on well at school? That’s the kind of thing I wonder about.’

As they see it, the person with whom they shared part of their childhood will always be part of their lives. One of the adult children found it a relief that her foster sister moved out of the foster home without warning. The home became peaceful, everyday life was predictable and her parents were more accessible. Despite feeling relief that the placement was at an end, she regretted not having been able to say goodbye to her foster sister properly.

The children said that neither their parents nor the CPS had involved them in discussions or decisions when the foster sibling moved away from the family, or given them explanation as to why the child moved out. They were not prepared for the move, nor did they have any influence over it. In this situation, the child’s scope of action was limited, since it was the parents and/or the CPS that decided that the foster sibling should move out. Decisions to move the foster child affect the lives and upbringing of biological children in foster families, and in both this study and other studies the biological children call for more information about the processes and greater participation in them (Fox 2001; Höjer 2001;

Nordenfors 2006; Heggdalsvik 2007; Twigg and Swan 2007; Younes and Harp 2007; Knutsen 2014).

Discussion

Combining theoretical perspectives in which children are viewed as subjects and agents with rights to participation, with a socio-cultural perspective, has facilitated a discussion on the participation for biological children in foster families. The rights perspective put focus on a child's opportunities to have influence in shaping his/her own life, and in the socio-cultural perspective children are seen as persons embedded in their families and other social relationships, and as relationally linked to their social context. Together these perspectives give a broad understanding of how children participate and create meaning in their daily lives through dialogue and negotiations in the cultural context in which they live.

The study reveals that a general feature of the children's narratives is that they perceived themselves as participants in the foster family. *In the initial phase*, they appear as active subjects who had discussed with their parents whether the family home should become a foster home. They presented, for example, their own motives for the family becoming a foster home, and stated that their needs and wishes were taken into account. They experienced being entwined in the relationships with their parents, negotiating what kind of foster family they will become, and participating actively with the rest of the family in preparing and shaping the foster home. In the initial phase, the biological children appear both as subjects and as part of relationships in the family context. In this phase, we can define their participation as a *partnership* between the parents and the children, since the children also influence the shaping of the foster family (Arnstein 1969; Hart 1992; Shier 2001).

In the second phase, shaping everyday life in the family with foster siblings, the biological children initially appear as both active and reflecting subjects. The biological children, the foster siblings and the parents form their relationships through continuous negotiations about agreements, engagement and commitments. The narratives show how the biological children take initiative, how they become involved in the everyday life of their foster sibling, and how they offer warmth and care.

Later on, and when difficulties arise, both the children and the adult children experience that their parents exclude them from discussions, and no longer include them in a partnership within the family. They experience for example that their parents access

knowledge about foster home practice from external sources. When they experience conflicts or sadness if the foster sibling has to move out, or when they see that their parents are exhausted, they find they are not involved in the same way in negotiations and discussions about how the family should handle the situation. This may be because the parents wish to shield their children from problems and difficult decisions in the family. However, the children's narratives show that the result is that they feel excluded and left to face their concerns alone.

The adult children in particular described challenges and difficult situations in a childhood growing up in a foster family. Some of them stated that to cope with these challenges, and to create meaning in their own situation, children should receive more information and support from both their parents and others during difficult periods, and upon discontinuation of the foster home. On the other hand, the adult children also told about the joys of getting a new family member, and still considered their foster siblings as part of their family. Despite having experienced that a foster family not always represent an ideal childhood, three of the four adult children are making plans to become foster parents in the future. They were looking forward to be able to give care to children in need of a new home.

Being a foster family appears to be a family project in which the upbringing of the biological children is subject to change in many ways. The foster family lies at the intersection of being a private home and a public home with assigned care duties, and the analysis shows that the biological children understand themselves as part of the foster home assignment from CPS. In both our study and other research, it emerges that CPS only deal with the foster parents, paying little attention to the biological children in the family (Fox 2001; Heggdalsvik 2007; Höjer 2001; Nordenfors 2006, 2015; Knutsen 2014; Twigg and Swan 2007; Younes and Harp 2007; Roche and Noble-Carr 2016; Targowska, Cavazzi and Lund 2016). This indicates that CPS often do not value the participation of the biological children in the everyday life of the foster family; and that the services also fail to acknowledge their right to be heard and involved in the foster home that creates the framework of their childhood.

Conclusion

We regard the study as exploratory because of the relatively limited sample size. Because of the selection process, there is a risk that the informant's families may have had more

challenges than other foster families. On the other hand, the fact that a large number of foster families have experienced a sudden move of the foster child implies that challenges and problems are not unusual in foster families. The findings correspond well with the few other studies in this area, so this study adds to the knowledge of the situation of biological children in foster homes, and their opportunities for active participation. Nevertheless, we will point out the need for longitudinal research on how biological children experience living in a foster home as the framework of their childhood, and how this may affect their life in a longer perspective. More research is also necessary to gain knowledge about how biological children are involved in the everyday life of the family, and how their rights to participate as members of the foster family are protected.

Based on our study, we believe that the findings indicate a need for changes in the practices of CPS and for exploring forms of professional practice that pay more attention to the situation of biological children in foster families. Topics of interest are: How can CPS include the biological children as participants in the decision-making processes and in the preparations for the arrival of a foster child in the family? How can CPS support the family, parents, biological children and the foster child in the shaping of everyday life and family relationships? Finally, forms of practice must be based on transparency and participation, safeguarding the emotional needs of the biological children when difficulties arise, and when the foster child unexpectedly moves out. Examples might be a family council or other forms of practice that involve the family members and professional partners. The children all have their own unique narrative about how they experience everyday life together with their foster sibling. Child protection services must therefore show sensitivity and listen to the narratives of each individual child and the child's need for help and support in everyday life.

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