

STUDY OF CHILD PLACEMENT IN FOSTER CARE: ANALYSIS OF SENSE OF BELONGING AND CONFLICT OF LOYALTIES

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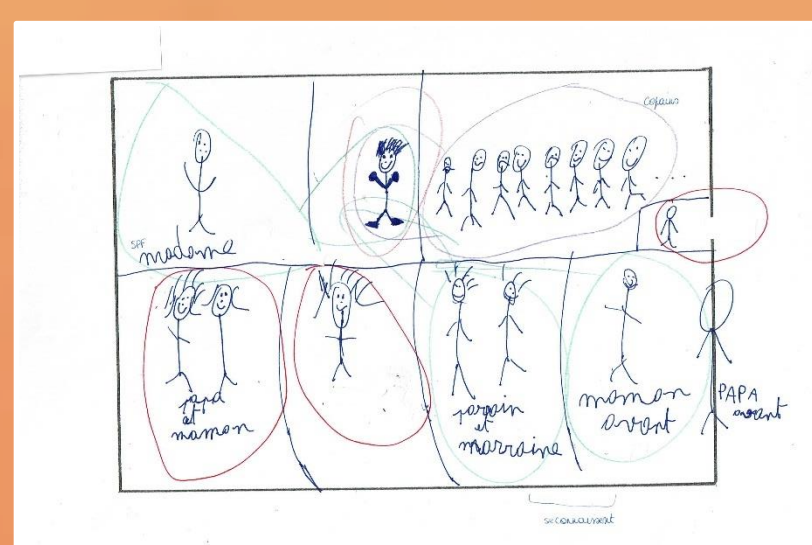
INTRODUCTION

In general, children placed in foster care define their families by mixing biological family and host family relationships (Biehal, 2014). Thus, the sense of belonging to the family of origin does not prevent the establishment of a sense of belonging to the host family (Christiansen et al., 2013). However, this may induce conflict of loyalties. Some foster children are loyal both to their biological parents, for whom they may feel ambivalent feelings, and to their foster parents, with whom they live and who are their source of protection and security. They could potentially be disturbed by these feelings of loyalty that seem incompatible (Maaskant et al., 2015; Atwool, 2013). The aim of this research was to question foster children and their family about their sense of belonging. Moreover, we questioned the children about their perception of the people constituting their family. Finally, conflict of loyalties was investigated in order to understand how children felt living in a foster family while keeping in touch with their biological family.

In this study, two hypotheses were tested. First, the child tends to include in the conception of his or her family the people with whom he or she lives on a daily basis (Gardner, 1996; 2004). In this way, his or her sense of belonging would be more present in relation to his or her host family. Second, conflict of loyalties may exist (Maaskant et al., 2015; Atwool, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

We used different tools including one we created, based on different indicators of sense of belonging and conflict of loyalties identified by previous research (ex. Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991). The study was conducted with a population of 10 foster families.



The drawing of the "Double Moon" (Greco, 2005): allows us to observe relationships, to have an overview of what each person considers to be "his" family and how each person manages the absence or distance of relatives



The "Language of Emotions" (Federation of Pluralist Family Planning Centres, 2013): a game of cards representing various emotions; it helps to identify children's feelings towards their foster and biological families



The Belonging and Loyalty Ladder (Meens & Scali, 2018): allows, through a medium, to address subjects that may be difficult for children in care and their foster families

Main variables studied

Sense of Belonging

- The nicknames "dad" and "mom"
- The last name
- Participation in family activities
- Impression of being loved and having a place
- Want to stay with your host family
- Dare to talk about your problems and feel understood
- Being happy in the family
- ...

Conflict of Loyalty

- Proximity with the biological mother
- Difficulties in talking about the biological family
- Questions asked about the biological family
- Ability to thank the family of origin and the host family
- Opening of the host family to the biological family

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Our results highlighted the presence of a double sense of belonging for all the foster children (belonging to the foster family and at the same time, to the biological family). Nevertheless, most of children felt a stronger sense of belonging towards their foster family than to their biological family. We also discovered that the concept of "family" could be difficult to understand for some children, and that for others, this notion spontaneously included only the members of their host family. Nevertheless, some children wanted to integrate some members of their family of origin into their family representation, and/or among the people important to them. The ideal family, on the other hand, is composed in most cases by the host family, at least in part. Finally, the majority of children expressed a conflict of loyalties but in different intensities. They would be loyal to each family for what the other family cannot provide: biological ties for one and everyday life and care for the other, which could create conflict in some cases. Indeed, the majority of children would have difficulty expressing themselves about their biological family because of fear, embarrassment, sadness or misunderstanding. This is supported by foster parents, who, for the most part, admitted that it is not a common topic of conversation in their daily lives. A possible link between this conflict and the openness of the foster family to the biological family has been identified and it would be interesting to test it in future studies.

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