

Bridges between families. Contact and its meaning for foster children, foster parents and birth families ¹

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1 Introduction

Contact in foster care is a central topic within foster care in general. The research question of our thesis arose from our work in a fostering service. Contact was and is a central issue in many counselling sessions. Searching the literature for definite answers about questions around contact yielded no satisfying answer. Between practitioners contacts are discussed controversially. Some experts say that they are good, some not. A general point in the literature is that contact with the ‘offender’ (often parents) is bad for traumatised children. In fact, many children in foster care are traumatised. Research from Germany and Switzerland shows that more than 50% of the children have traumas (Arnold, 2010, & Perez et al., 2011, qtd. as cited in Unterberg et al., 2013). Many of them have contact to their parents, who often are responsible for insufficient and traumatising care or abuse. These answers were not helpful. The fundamental discussion whether more or less contact is better for the well-being and development of the child led us to our research. Contact is often part of research into different issues. There are few studies in the German speaking area dealing with contact centrally, and no study includes the voice of all involved parties. We decided to do a fundamental, qualitative research to identify how contacts are working and how they are seen by the involved parties. Our central question was:

How are contacts between foster children and their families in long-term foster care from the perspective of the involved parties (children, foster carers, birth family)?

To contextualize our research, we give a short overview about foster care in Austria. Around 0,7% of the children (0-18y) are placed out of home. The ratio between children in residential care and children in foster care and also the general organisation of foster care varies by state (“Bundesland”). On average, 42,2% of children in care are placed in foster families (Gesierick et al., 2015; Scheipl, 2009). Children can be placed in foster care at any age and some of them stay until they are grown-up. Adoption is only considered if parents agree to it. In foster and residential care, parents have a right to contact unless limited by court. They can also request getting the child back at court or withdraw their consent, if it was a ‘voluntary’ arrangement, anytime. Contact arrangements are made by the involved parties themselves, by youth welfare services or by court.

2 Methodology

Our research is a multi-perspective qualitative study based on a grounded theory methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss (1998) and Strauss and Corbin (1996). Following this approach, the aim is to generate theory out of the data. This approach to research is procedural and includes the different perspectives to the topic (Strübing, 2008). The expectations of the

¹ This article is based on the results of our thesis (Hofer-Temmel & Rothdeutsch-Granzer, 2016)

founders Glaser and Strauss are met, if the result is a theory which can explain social processes and can partially predict social phenomena. Further, it is important to get a theory leading to better practice (Strübing, 2008). To acquire the data for the multi-perspective study, we did qualitative interviews with children, foster carers, birthparents and a supervising social worker.

Additionally, we employed three assisting theories. The literature and approaches about childhood research helped us with the design of the children's interviews (Heinzel, 1997, 2002; Roux, 2002). We decided on creative, child-oriented methods for the focused guided interview with the children. At a first meeting with the interview partners, the children got a camera with the suggestion to take pictures of the next contact. The aim of the photo method was to give the children some time to grapple with the issue 'contact' and to have an inspiration and a support for the interview. The photos were not interpreted or allayed by the researchers. We also offered the children the opportunity to draw a picture about the contact during the interview. For the interviews with adults we used the ideas of Ullrich (1999). He developed a research approach and interview style on how to reach the social patterns of interpretation. Therefore, we employed the style of the discursive interview. A particular way to ask questions is, for example, that the interviewer states a common opinion and the interviewed person can take a position. The style of the discursive interview helps also with topics where people tend to give political correct answers. We were interested in their individual, specific opinions to analyse the workings of contacts. The eco-social theory by Bronfenbrenner (1981) was used for the initial analysis of the first case. Bronfenbrenner's eco-social analysis was helpful to frame the influences on contact. It opened the view for which dimensions impact contact, also including time and values. Later, we developed our own 'fragments of theory' out of the data, following the coding rules of grounded theory to build our own theoretical approach of contacts in foster care.

The research process was led by the grounded theory. We fixed two key criteria for our research. One was that we only looked at long term foster placements which began at least minimum one year before the start of our investigation. The reason for this criteria was that we wanted to look at contact in relatively settled placements, assuming that contacts in short-term-placement work quite differently. The second criteria was to choose cases in which the children were between 7 and 12 years, because they should be able to talk with the researchers and not yet be in adolescence. The birth family becomes an important topic during adolescence and the nature of contacts could get more complicated and develops fast in different directions.

For the first case, we asked colleagues to suggest cases fulfilling the general key criteria. After collecting the data in the form of interviews with all involved parties, the data was transliterated and analysed. The first case, for example, consisted of two siblings, the birth mother, the birth grandparents, the foster mother and also the professional contact supervisor. From the results of the first case, we developed criteria to do the theoretical sampling for the second case with a different constellation. After collecting this new data, we made another analysis resulting in additional criteria. In total, we did four cases between 2011 and 2014 to reach a grade of theoretical saturation. After the third case, we developed the core category and theoretical model (importance of feeling secure worked out in the spin-top model) and used the fourth case (maximum variation sample) to test and amend it. As we found there only small additions and we could also not find inconsistencies in our practical work, we accepted the grade of saturation.

The processual research was accompanied by literature research and field work which was part of the research process. Our practical work in the fostering service influenced our thoughts of proofs or counterexamples to sharpen the theoretical framework. We have been aware of the double-role as researchers and practitioners. We did not take cases in which we were practically involved and made it transparent for the interview partners that we were coming as a researcher and not in a professional capacity. Grounded theory demands openness from the researchers. In this case, we used the concept of reflecting openness described by Breuer (2009), which points out that you have to handle existing knowledge. It was necessary to reflect existing concepts, knowledge and assumptions during working with the data (Breuer, 2009). Additionally, the fact that we were two researchers with an educational background in different fields (social work and social pedagogy) was also helpful to get distance from the data. The advantages were being acquainted with a large number of cases and easy access to interview partners, whereas a disadvantage of the double-role was the risk of not having enough distance to the data. Further, the style of this text is influenced by the simpler use of language practitioners use in their daily interaction with families.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to think about quality in the research process. For grounded theory the classical criteria such as validity, reliability representativeness and objectivity are not obvious. For Glaser and Strauss a grounded theory is good, if the results can explain social processes and can partly forecast them. Especially, if the results help the practitioners to understand and control situations (Glaser & Strauss, 1998, as cited in Strübing, 2008). Important are the continuous examination and permanent comparison during development of the theory. Representativeness should be reached with theoretical sampling, which leads to as good as possible theoretical saturation (Strübing, 2008). To gain objective theories, there are special methods about analysing data in grounded theory. Open coding is followed by axial and selective coding, dimensionalising (elaboration of many facets through contrasting) and working with memos (Strübing, 2008).

3 Findings out of literature

Contacts between children in care and their families have been increasing over the last years (Brousek, 2010; Sinclair, Gibbs, & Wilson, 2004). Most of the children living with foster families have contact with their birth family. Research in German speaking countries shows that between 50-80 percent of the children are in contact with their birth family (Blandow, 1999, Erzberger, 2003; Prietl, 2014). These percentages are difficult to compare, because contact can be understood as contact to parents or as contact to the wider birth family, such as grandparents or siblings. Additionally, the questions about having contact could be understood in different ways, because we know that there are also often interruptions in contact. If you think also about contacts to the wider birth family, the percentage is possibly even much higher.

Very important for the understanding of contacts is also the legal embedding. The right of contact between parents and children is defined in the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR 1953, Article 8) and in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989, Article 7 & 9). Contacts in Austria are a right of both the child and the parents. In case of doubt, contacts should be in the interest of the child's well-being. Austrian law stipulates that contact is preferably decided in agreement. The challenge lies in assessing the children's wishes and feelings, because the adults can usually better act for themselves. Wishes from the children and their well-being in general are not the same. Zitelmann (2001) describes that a neutral person is helpful to accompany the child and to deal with the child and its will. This

person can be a kind of translator to the court and parents and should be able to protect the child.

Another challenge is that courts often see contacts the same as contacts in families with divorced or separate parents. As Salgo (2013) describes, a frequent request from professionals is to consider the special situation of foster children when contact arrangements are made. It must be taken into account that these children have a special – maybe a traumatic – history with their parents and that often they had to begin in a new family. Furthermore, in countries such as Austria and Germany, there is little legal certainty about the duration of the foster arrangement. If parents are divorced or separated from each other, then children normally have a secure or positive attachment to their parents. If a child is removed from their family because of neglect and/or abuse, then a traumatic parent-child relationship is obvious (Brisch, 2012; Van der Kolk, 1998). In a foster arrangement, it has to be considered how much contact is good for the child, so that it can make correcting experiences and is able to deal with the contact in a constructive way.

There is a wide range of different foster family constellations. A special one is kinship care. Kinship care refers to the situation where family members or friends become carers of the child. In some countries, kinship care is the common care solution. In German speaking countries, there are mainly foster carers who are not related to the child (Blandow & Kūfner, 2010). If caregivers are relatives or friends of the birth family, then there is a special impact on contact. Then, contacts happen more often, are more informal, have less involvement from youth welfare social workers and have less supervised contact through professionals (Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Walter, 2004). These facts can improve or inhibit contacts, depending on the conflicts and coping strategies of the family. Because of pre-existing relationships and bias within the family, the needs of the child may not be appropriately seen (Sinclair, Wilson, & Gibbs, 2005). On the other hand, contact in kinship care has the potential of being something ordinary, because family members are meeting each other as they do in general.

As already discussed in the introduction, knowledge over trauma is relevant for contacts. It turns out that the number of complex traumatised children in care is larger than the number of non-complex-traumatised ones. The main reasons for the transition to care are neglect and abuse. In such cases, children experience their parents as neglecting or abusing persons. Research shows a correlation between stable foster care and stopping contact with parents who have been caregivers of the child (Neil, Cossar, Jones, Lorgelly, & Young, 2011; Sinclair et al., 2005). There is no evidence about causality, though. Recent research findings in the field of psychotraumatology shows that the subjective feeling of security or insecurity from the individual is essential, if a situation has traumatic effects (Fischer & Riedesser 2009). Thus, the assessment of observers in regard to the level of traumatical effects is secondary. The subjective stress perception, physical stress response and the various forms of expressions of traumatic stress from the child should be noticed by the adults and are critical factors for contact decisions. Kline & Levine (2007) provide an overview of secondary symptoms of trauma such as over excitation, dissociation and freezing. Additionally, research shows that children and foster parents often have complex and mixed feelings towards contact. Children are often torn between positive and ambivalent feelings. Foster parents, on the one hand, speak positively about contact, supporting and advocating it, and, on the other hand, they talk about negative influence on their family. Qualitative interviews over everyday-life make apparent that contact is one reason for troubles within the foster family, posing a challenge to the whole family (Leitner, 2012; Prietl, 2014). Foster parents are stressed by handling contact with aggressive parents, if parents operate against the foster parents or if

needs of the parents are put above the needs of the child. If foster parents feel unable to help their child, then contacts become complicated (Leitner, 2012; Sinclair u. a., 2004). Professionals view contacts more positive than foster parents. Interestingly, even if professionals see that the child is put at risk, contacts are not reduced (Biehal, Ellison, Baker, & Sinclair, 2010). Cleaver (2000) shows that, independent of the existence of personal contact, almost all children and many birth relatives think of each other daily.

Contacts are not a stable factor in care, but are processual because of their changing type and frequency during childhood. The type of contact can vary between personal and written contact, having phone calls, supervised or non-supervised, with or without staying overnight. In general, contacts are more frequent at the beginning and tend to diminish over time (Brousek, 2010). There are cases with interruptions for months or years (Erzberger, 2003; Prietl, 2014). The age of the child when put into care and the number of prior care placements influence contact frequency. The older the child has been when put into care and the less prior care arrangements it had, the more likely are regular contacts when living in the foster family (Kötter, 1997).

The main arguments for keeping contact are the maintenance of the relationship between child and birth family and seeing them as a basis for building up the child's identity. Social workers describe that the intentions for contacts are maintaining or improving the relationship between child and birth family. Often, the goal of contact is the contact itself (Sinclair et al., 2005). The assumption is that considerations and goals are not discussed with all involved parties.

It would be interesting to know which influences predict good contact, but no general theory is known yet. The mind set and attitude of birth parents and foster parents towards each other are relevant for a working contact, but are not the only influence. Further, it is important that children are settled in their foster families and that they feel secure (Biehal et al., 2010). Sinclair et al. (2005) searched for several influencing factors without finding significant results. They suggest that the degree of (un)coped grief about not living in the birth family may be an important factor in the influence contact has on the foster placement. Neil and Howe (2004) enumerated all known risk factors and beneficial factors for the child, birth parents and foster parents. With the help of this summary, one may estimate how contacts could work out in different constellations. They conclude that contacts are good, if they promote the child's development or at least do not disturb it.

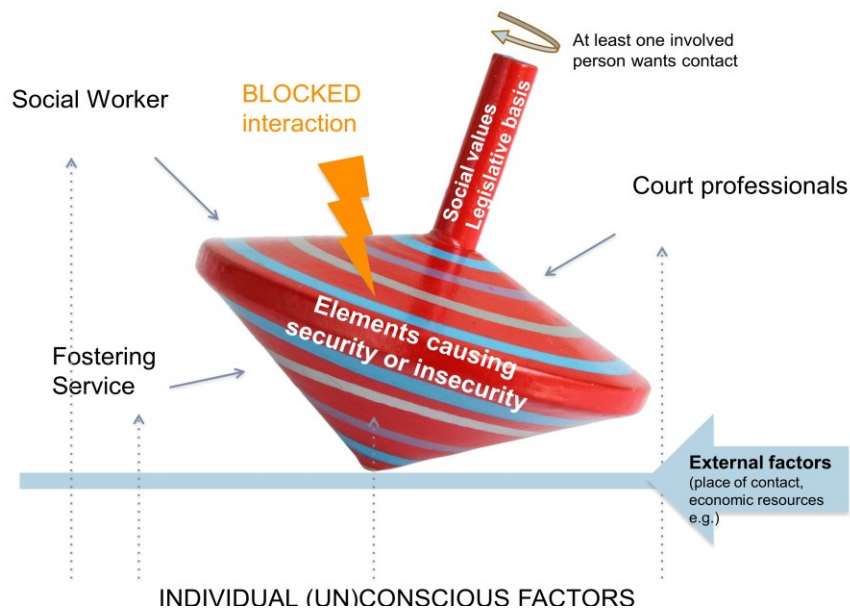
4 The processual structure of security and insecurity

In grounded theory, the core category is the central category developed abductively out of the material and contains the essence of the data. Additional categories refine the core category and can be found in our dissertation. The core category describes the influence of subjective security and insecurity in the contact constellation:

The individual and processual structure of subjective recognised security and insecurity in every contact constellation of birth family, child and foster family, is constituted through internal and external factors and is essential for a working contact.

Therefore, contact is influenced by external factors, professionals and the impact of them on the subjectively felt security of the involved persons. Subjective security appears when the involved persons feel as stable and confident as possible in relation to the contact. To make this finding more accessible and practical, we have developed the spin top model.

In our analysis, we first identified different theory fragments. These yielded information on the dynamics in contacts and were the basis for extracting the general effects. As researchers before us described, too, we had first the problem that we found many influencing factors which were valid for many cases, but we often found some exceptions. In thinking about the lowest common denominator between all our results, we discovered the dynamics of security and insecurity in an abductive way. We enhanced, verified and improved the basic idea of security and insecurity and developed the spin top model to visualize our result. The spin top model is related to six theoretical conclusions, which we describe further below.



GRAPHIC SPIN TOP MODEL

The spin top illustrates the essential parts of a contact constellation. There are different influences and interdependencies, which are visualized through this model. Influences from inside and outside may have an impact on the involved people and further the contact arrangement. Knowledge about the amount of perhaps disturbing or stabilising factors alone cannot forecast (non)succeeding contacts. More important is the influence of these factors on the security felt by the children, foster parents and birth family. If they are secure enough in their essential points, then contacts work. This way of regarding the contact constellation may be seen as an extension of accounting only for resources and strains. Important are the personal needs of every involved person and also the interdependency between them, which affect security and insecurity.

The shape and composition of the spin top is not fixed, but depends on the security of the involved persons. The more secure the involved persons are, the smoother it spins and the less sensitive it is to external influences. If contacts are ongoing, then the surface of the spin top is not visible because it is spinning. The surface of the spin top becomes recognisable only if it turns slowly or stands still. The body of the spin top consists of neutral, security causing or insecurity causing elements. One has to be aware of that only a part of the dynamic is visible on the surface. The influences on the spin top are from inside the contact constellation (personal characteristics and attributes) and outside (conditions and framework). They are sensed by children, foster parents and birth family differently as reinforcing security, insecurity or as not relevant.

The more security the involved are feeling and the more safety causing elements are present, the more compact the body of the spin top is. This leads to a better balance, smoother rotation and a higher tolerance to disturbing influences. If there is a whole network of security, then some insecurity causing elements could be counterbalanced. The spin top, as we see it as model for contacts, is permanently changing in its form and composition. Individual development and outside conditions cause transformation. Insecurities are quite normal at the beginning of a foster placement through encountering new situations, getting in contact with unknown and sometimes challenging people, information gaps and experiences of loss and grief. Later, in a good process, confidence and trust grow, and therefore the feeling of security, too. Through different influences and development, it is always possible that the spin top struggles. Adaptions are necessary to improve the security in the system or of the persons. In the following, we describe the six basic theses in detail.

4.1 Social values and legislative basis build the axis

Starting point for contacts and energy for the spin top are the social values and the legislative basis. They are influenced by the society's view on the relation between parents and children in general. If the society thinks that it is necessary to have contact with your birth family, then there are laws which allow or regulate it. To speak in the spin top image: the society's view on family and parenting, values and laws build the axis of the spin top. As contact between children and their biological family is seen as important, there are contacts in foster care arrangements. The needs for relations, especially from (lonely) birth parents, longings of children for a better relationship to their parents, and/or professionals or foster parents wishing contact give the impulse to spin.

4.2 Contacts are developing processually, individually and experimentally

Contacts have to be seen as unique and processual. They change over time and are in transformation through different reasons. Their uniqueness is the reason why there are few generally valid statements about contacts. Even contacts of the same child with different members of the birth family can have very different dynamics.

In the cases we found different periods of time, often shared by all involved, in which the contacts take a specific form. In the first case, there were many close contacts at the beginning of the foster placement, because the aim was the children's return to their parents. With the decision that the children would not return to the parents, the nature of contacts changed. They were less frequent and the foster parents distanced themselves more than before. The aim changed and the children could stay with a long perspective in the foster family. As the birth father died, contacts changed again. After his death, the grandparents got involved, because they wanted to help their daughter to see the children. They gave her lifts with the car and they also took the children to their home over the weekend, where the mother of the children could visit them. The last change happened, when conflicts between the mother and grandparents gave the impulse for the mother to visit the children herself. When the interviews were made, the children went occasionally for a weekend to their grandparent's place and the mother visited the children herself with a professional contact supervisor. Major life events, the perspective of the foster placement, the death of the father and the emancipation of the mother had considerable influence on the contacts. In the other analysed cases, the adults had the same understanding of the process and development, too.

The growth of the children is another reason that contacts are processual. Contacts change because children have different possibilities and demands in different stages of their

development. In one case, the child started to spend the visit's time at the place of his father's place and later also spend from time to time a night there. During the first years, the contact was in a neutral place and later in the foster family's home.

Children not only have contact to their birth parents, but also to other relatives such as siblings or grandparents. Visits by a child differ between its relatives. Visits to grandparents or sometimes to fathers often have a more 'normal' characteristic than visits between child and mother. This is so, because it is more common or even 'normal' that a child does not live with his father or grandparent. Visits to the mother are more special, because it is rather unusual and not socially approved that children live apart from their mothers. The relationship the visitors had before the child got in care is also important. If they were the main caregivers or are responsible for traumata, then contacts can also be more difficult.

In general, contacts are often experimental following the motto 'trial and error'. The complexity of contacts make forecasts of consequences even by senior professionals prior to interventions not easy. A good contact arrangement is therefore flexible to change if it does not meet the expectations.

4.3 Structure of the spin top: elements causing security, insecurity or neutral ones

The body of the spin top looks different in every contact constellation. The structure is built out of elements which can have an impact on feeling more secure or insecure. The impacts are linked to each other and depend on the involved individuals. The elements can be something personal, as for example, the insecurity a foster mother is feeling in her role because of an attachment disorder of the child. They can also be non-personal, like if the question of return to the birth family is currently discussed and the perspective becomes unclear again. The success of contacts depends generally the feeling of security of the involved persons. The more security there is in the system, the more stable the spin top is moving. Possibly irritating facts such as limited financial resources, time, physical distance between foster and birth family or appropriate locations for such contacts are not as relevant if the spin top is moving rather stable. The subjective feelings are also impressed by unconscious, deeper reasons. If, for example, parents were foster children themselves, then they possibly mix their own needs with the needs of the child.

In many contact constellations, there are occasionally situations when insecurity causes troubles. These troubles are individual and do not depend on the 'objective' resources, but on specific reasons which cause security or insecurity for the involved. Every involved person can contribute to it. Some insecurities are normal and can be balanced by a functional constellation, if there is enough basic security and everybody accepts that there is special variation of spin top movement. An example of the interaction between security and insecurity are the rules for contact. For some they give a feeling of security, if they know that they act on specific rules. Others feel patronised and irritated. Sometimes there is an influence from the manner of establishing rules or from the intensity of the intervention.

Fundamental for this view on contacts is a sphere of value-neutral discourse over the involved individuals, their biographies and attitudes. Every foster child is in a situation impressed by securities and insecurities. This model should not seduce professionals to quickly question relationships or into thinking that foster care would be better with 'better' foster carers. Its aim is to guide the view to stabilising options for counteracting troubles.

4.4 Blockades of interaction

In the interviews with the children and in one interview with an adult, we discovered interesting phenomena. We encountered children who talk fluently about everyday themes, but stock if the topic was about their contacts. They stock or they detract from the contact topic, they provoke with swearwords, show things like a ‘tissue-rain’², opposition or, in one case, a drawing of weapons and knives instead of contact and family. At the beginning, we thought that these interviews were rather useless, but we soon found out that the special behaviour appeared whenever the researcher tried to speak about specific aspects of contact. The children generally were able to get in contact and to speak and interact with the researcher. Then, we identified these phenomena as ‘blockade of interaction’, a concept also used in linguistics. There, it means ‘techniques’ such as antagonism, refusal or denial, which are used in conversations and are seen as characteristics of escalation (Apeltauer 1978 qtd. as cited in Spiegel, 2011). Children and adults use this technique not consciously, but it is obvious that specific topics lead to blockades. Blockades encountered in the talks with the children show that children are irritated and that the contact arrangement is not in balance at this moment. In one case where the child reacted with the above mentioned behaviour, it turned out that the decision over the duration of the placement had not yet been made explicitly.

To illustrate our findings in interaction blockades, we present examples from the data. First, there is a passage where the researcher invites the child to draw a picture of a contact at home.

R: Would you rather like to draw a picture from a visit at home?

C: I’ll draw a robber.

R: Would you rather like to draw a robber? Because I would be interested in how a contact at home is running.

C: Okay.

R: You could draw a robber on this picture, too.

C: I only draw a robber. I’m good in drawing a robber. (Int. PK2, P. 149-154)

The child reacts in changing the subject, although the prior conversation over the foster family and its parents dog was fluently. The idea of the researcher to combine the idea of the child with her own idea of research was not successful. More concrete is the following quote, where the same child describes itself as confused after it returns to the foster family from the contacts. After this opening, it quickly changes to talking about dinosaurs.

R: What are you doing then? Are you doing something specific? How is it when you are coming home to Ingrid (foster mum)?

C: There, I’m first confused.

R: Confused?

² Child produces a kind of ‘rain’ by throwing tissues in the air.

C: That [not understandable, very loud] THAT SHOULD BE WRITTEN, OF A DINO, CHHHH (child activates the sounds of his dinosaur and is looking at a dinosaur book). This one doesn't exist. This one exists. But I search for you (activates the sound of this dinosaur). That is called fern (pointing to a plant in the book). (Int. PK2, P. 345-348)

At this point the child changes the topic while simultaneously speaking very loudly. There is also another child interview, where one can observe these blockades. The child changes in a similar manner the topic whenever a certain issue arises and starts an activity such as the mentioned tissue-rain. In this case, the researcher had the information that the child does not like to go to the contacts with its father and that the reasons for this temporal aversion are not known. In the following passage the child reacts with a blockade in conversation to the question about a reason for not wanting contact with its father.

R: Okay. Tell me about, because I think that you liked it at the begin to go with Chris³ [birth father].

C: Yes.

R: And then you didn't like it anymore. Is there a reason for it?

C: No, there is none.

R: Just how it is.

C: No, there is NO certain REASON ANYMORE. Because it, I haven't a clue, because (...) I don't know (beckoning). Eeeh, I (drawn out) really don't know. (Int. PK3, P. 123-137)

This child also changes the loudness of the conversation. In a further passage, where the topic is 'activities during the contact', it changes to the topic 'ceiling lamp', when it is asked about its part in decision making (Int. PK3, P. 205-210). Finally, there is a third passage out of the same interview, in which the topic of the current difficult contact leads to another interaction blockade.

R: Is it possible, that you are maybe feeling bored with Chris?

C: Yes, yes, bored. Therefore. I love this chip stone (child picks up a chip stone and throws it through the room, laughing). I just have my tissues. Hahaha (picks up the tissues and climbs on the bed to throw them down). I do this every time. (Int. PK3, P. 144-145).

The child changes from the topic contact to father to a chip stone and tissue-rain. We could also find such a blockade in an interview with a parent. In the conversation with this father it strikes that he switches quickly and without an input through the researcher to talking about the situation before the child got in care. This happens in several text passages. The time before care was difficult for him, because he worried about his child but had less influence. This occurrence in the interview could be interpreted as that the first years as father have been very strongly related with grief and helplessness and that the conversation triggers memories of these feelings.

³ Names were anonymised.

R: Before the contact, are you like nervous or excited?

P: You are just happy about it.

R: Ok. Pleasant anticipation. And when it is really happening as per agreement, then it is okay.

P: Because in spring, there we have made it with the agency. But, I don't know, I could see him there for two hours, but you have to make two appointments in advance, and then the mother is coming half an hour before we should meet saying that the child is sleeping. Over. Alone, the social workers is seeing it, and the judge. The judge rather helped me in the whole thing. (Int. KV3, P. 235-238).

First, the topic of the conversation is about happiness and positive excitement before contact. Suddenly, the father switches to his disappointment about not realised contacts some years ago when the child lived with its mother. This happened also in some other passages of the interview. The child lived already some years in the foster family at this time. It shows a very good development. The conversation changed to its difficult past caused interaction blockades during the interview. The present interaction with the child could also be blocked through the not processed past which has strong effects in the present. In this case, the foster mother describes that she does not feel much of a relationship between the child and its father. This could also be result of a blocked interaction. She tells that the father is acting out of his needs (e.g. own experiences and needs as child) and takes little notice of his child standing in front of him. The father, though, shows strong interest in the child and stays in touch, while interaction seems to be not fluently yet.

Hence, blockades of interaction in this contacts means temporary blocked interaction because of a particular topic. We suppose that blocked interaction in the interview is also reproduced in real contacts. Difficulties in contact could be seen as blockades and could further lead to the question of how blockades could be lifted. Interaction blockades are a hint that the contact arrangement is actually the reason that children or parents are confused, do not want or can not talk about it. This sign should be taken seriously and may be a beginning of rethinking the contact situation.

4.4 Constitutive and limiting framework

There are external factors which take effect on the arrangement of contacts, which limit contacts and can hardly be changed. The distance between the residence of the foster family and the birth family, mobility, working hours, seasons etc. have influence on contacts. In one case, there was a break in contact because the mother had to go to jail for some time. These basic conditions influence the contacts and require handling them. Basic resources are outcome of social and family networks from all involved. In other cases, the relatives borrowed the parent a car to make it possible that he/she could make the way to the foster carers' home or giving him/her a lift. The arrangement of contact is adapted by the situation. Depending on how stable the spin top is moving, the more or less sensitive is it to external factors.

4.5 Collaborating professionals

Another impact on the contact have collaborating professionals from different institutions. The youth welfare services, the local court and other professional services are working with

the birth and foster family. They have a professional, objective aim and role, but they also have an impact on the contact's dynamic with their personal views and life experiences.

The task of these professionals is to assure the well-being of the child. They manage the balance of interests in care arrangements. At the same time, they operate processes and advise families. Sometimes, they are strongly present, sometimes they have minimum of required contact. The satisfaction of the families with the grade of involvement differs, too. We found wishes for more involvement of the professionals, but also satisfaction with the situation of less presence. Getting recognition by the youth welfare services could be one reason for wishing more involvement, whereas less involvement implies that families are free to find their own solutions in communicating with the other family.

Professionals can increase security, if they are noticed as supporting. They are put at risk to be confronted with opposition, if they do not have adequate resources or possibilities to accompany the foster care constellation regularly and create confidence. In one case, the foster parents feel like applicants and criticised for their commitment. They describe that there were times, when there was no contact from the authority. They wish to get a phone call at least once per year, asking how it is going with them and the child (Int. PE3, P. 823-829). With regard to contact, some foster and birth parents like to be trusted to make own agreements as long everything is working. One father describes that he likes to organise contact directly with the foster parents and without a youth welfare social worker. He would be allowed to see the child more often, but he does not do this, because he does not want to 'tear him from the family' (Int. KV3, P. 66).

There is one case where all involved are satisfied with involvement of the youth welfare social worker. She holds contact to all of them and is obviously good in finding compromises. The children are represented by the foster mother, birth mother and professional supervisor. (Int. BB, P. 101-104). The birth mother is happy about how the social worker is acting. She feels that the social worker is interested in that she stays in contact with her children and that it is easy to get an appointment, if needed (Int. KM2, P. 129). These contacts are supervised by another professional, who seems not to disturb because the mother is talking about seeing her children alone. She likes the supervisor's interest in her and the possibility to have meetings where every perspective is heard. She likes being called before the contact (Int. KM1, P. 201), too, and sees these calls as positive attention to her.

Youth welfare services can be helpful as a place of mediation, if problems in the contact arrangement occur. A mother describes the result of a clarifying meeting between the foster mother and her with the youth welfare service as relief. She found it very positive that they reached flexibilisation there (Int. KM2, P. 37). Interestingly, the foster mother felt very comfortable with the results of this meeting too. There are also risks in too little involvement. A foster mother describes that she told a problem to the social worker who answered that she should talk with the birth parents herself. In the interview passage it is obvious that she still has worries, because it was not possible for her to solve the problem herself (Int. PM2, P. 90-91). As it can be seen, a good balance between involving and restraint of professionals is not easy to find. Too little involvement and too much restraint can lead to difficulties.

In general it is stabilising, if all involved parties feel being heard by the youth welfare authority. Most of them know that contact arrangements are compromises, where hardly every interest can be taken into account. It seems that a minimum of contact between professionals and foster parents is beneficial, so that there is knowledge about the case, if difficulties

appear. If everything is going well, then it seems good to let responsibility for the contact arrangement stay with the involved parties.

5 Conclusion

The spin top theory says that contacts in foster care placements are unique and processual, which could rotate, tumble, freeze and start moving again. The key point is that the involved individuals in contacts need a sufficient feeling of security to counterbalance the insecurities caused by internal and external factors in the whole system. Professional intervention and assistance should try to increase the objective and subjective recognized security and reduce insecurity in the contact-figure. It is necessary for practise to look individually at cases of contacts and to try to make interventions which let the subjective feeling of security grow. This understanding could be transferred to foster care placements in general.

An open attitude of practitioners is helpful in professional support of contacts. The aim is not to find the perfect contact constellation. Families and foster placements are unique and they have individual solution and coping strategies, which could be of great benefit in the process of contact. Following this way of thinking, professional work does not standardise contacts, but promotes individual and unusual solutions if they lead to better contacts for the involved.

The interviews made clear that children in burdening family situations and with traumatic experiences avoid to or are unable to speak about their anxieties, worries and needs. To engage these children, it is necessary to consider their non-verbal forms of communication, their body language and their visible physical stress reactions. Therefore, creative forms of expression should be developed and used not only in psychotherapy, but also in social work and support.

Contacts in foster placements are relationships between birth family, child and foster family. The spin top model shows that conflicts and tumbling is usual for this sort of contact. Sometimes contacts are high pressure and mean burden and stress for the involved. Blockades of interaction could appear and show that it is necessary to look for more security. One general aim could be to build bridges between families for the child and to give the child sufficient security and the opportunity to decide on its own tempo to walk over this bridge. The success of the foster placement and the usefulness of the contacts in the individual case are questions, which could probably be answered retrospectively in the early adult years.

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