



Monitoring the development of foster children

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Foster children's behaviour is more problematic than that of their peers in 'normal' family situations. However, it is difficult to determine the exact cause of behavioural problems. Anouk Goemans, a researcher in clinical child and adolescent studies, calls for more screening and monitoring. PhD defence on 27 June.

About 20,000 children are currently in foster care in the Netherlands. Some because of parental neglect or even abuse, others because behavioural problems or parental limitations made caring for them too much of a challenge. They were placed in a foster family for the shorter or longer term.

Behavioural problems

Unfortunately, some of these children have to leave their foster family prematurely because of difficulties that are often caused by behavioural problems. In the most serious cases, children end up moving from foster family to foster family. PhD candidate Anouk Goemans looked for factors that have a positive effect on a foster child's development and can thus prevent this from happening. The ideal outcome would have been a model that predicts the psychosocial development of foster children.

No prediction model

Goemans didn't manage to come up with such a prediction model. A meta-analysis of various prior studies and a longitudinal study [a study with several observations over a period of time, ed.] did provide a number of predictors, but as Goemans says, there is 'too much interindividual variation' in the development paths of foster children. 'Although the predictors can to some extent explain the development of children in foster care, together they do not yield a model that can accurately predict this development.'

Extra help

One of Goemans' discoveries was that extra help from support workers, for instance supervision or interventions, correlates negatively with behavioural problems in foster children. In other words: children who received extra support displayed more behavioural problems. Goemans: 'But this result was based on a single observation. The most plausible explanation is quite simply that children with problems must receive more support than those who don't have problems.' The foster children in the study who did *not* receive extra support also displayed considerable behavioural problems.

Parental stress

Goemans also found that behavioural problems in foster children predict more parental stress in foster parents, but not vice versa. It therefore appears that foster parents do not burden foster children with their own stress. Goemans: 'This could be because becoming a foster parent is often a conscious decision, or because of the preparation courses that they follow.'

Systematic monitoring

Goemans therefore advises support workers to systematically screen and monitor the development of foster children, so that they can provide extra support wherever necessary. In addition, this will make it possible for researchers to determine the factors that cause behavioural problems. Placement policy could be changed on the basis of these findings, ensuring that children stay longer in a foster family.

Checklist

Tools do exist that allow for a more structural monitoring, but they have not yet been implemented in the Netherlands. The Brief Assessment Checklist (BAC) is particularly useful, says Goemans. This tool – which is already in use in Australia, New Zealand, Germany and England – can measure the relationship between foster parent and child quickly and effectively. Does the child yearn for affection? Does the child fail to distinguish between its foster family and strangers? The BAC includes all these signs, which makes it a useful tool for support workers. Its systematic use could be the next step to a prediction model.