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Navigating the Complexities of Caring for Children with Special Needs: The Experiences and Challenges of Foster Parents in Hungary



ABSTRACT

This study delves into the multifaceted challenges encountered by foster parents in Hungary who provide care for children with special needs. Drawing upon data from a comprehensive survey conducted among foster parents in 2022, the research illuminates the intricacies of providing adequate care and support for children with physical, mental, or behavioral disabilities within the context of the foster care system. The findings underscore the pressing need for enhanced financial assistance, improved access to specialist care, and strengthened collaboration between foster parents and professionals to safeguard the well-being and development of these vulnerable children. Through a sociological and philosophical lens, this study explores the broader implications of these challenges on the foster care system and society as a whole.

KEYWORDS

Keywords: vulnerable youth, foster care, child protection

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INTRODUCTION

The foster care system serves as a vital safety net for children who have been removed from their biological families due to various circumstances, providing them with a nurturing and supportive family environment (Dozier et al., 2014). Within this context, children with special needs represent a particularly vulnerable subgroup, requiring specialized care and attention to address their unique physical, mental, or behavioral challenges (Lauver, 2008, Jancsák 2013, Sánta 2016). This study aims to shed light on the experiences of foster parents in Hungary who have taken on the responsibility of caring for children with special needs, focusing on the multifaceted challenges they face and the support mechanisms available to them. By examining these experiences through a sociological and philosophical lens, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in the foster care system and the broader societal implications of caring for children with special needs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the ecological systems theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), which emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals within the context of their environment. According to this theory, the development and well-being of children are influenced by the interplay of various systems, including the microsystem (immediate family and caregivers), mesosystem (interactions between different microsystems), exosystem (indirect influences such as community resources), and macrosystem (broader societal and cultural factors) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). By applying this theoretical framework to the experiences of foster parents caring for children with special needs, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges they face and the support they require at different levels of the ecological system.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study draws upon data from a survey titled “Foster Parents 2022” (Kothencz 2022) conducted among foster parents in Hungary. The survey included a range of questions pertaining to the experiences of caring for children with special needs, encompassing physical disabilities,

chronic illnesses, and severe psychological or behavioral problems. The sample consisted of 1,259 foster parents, representative of the foster parent population in Hungary. The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by foster parents and the support they require.

KEY FINDINGS

Prevalence of special needs: The survey revealed that 14% of foster parents reported caring for children with severe psychological or behavioral issues, while 26.2% cared for children with chronic illnesses or disabilities. These figures highlight the significant proportion of children with special needs within the foster care system and the consequent demands placed on foster parents.

CHALLENGES FACED BY FOSTER PARENTS

- a) **Increased workload and emotional strain:** Caring for children with special needs often requires additional time, effort, and emotional investment from foster parents. The survey findings indicated that foster parents experienced heightened levels of stress and burnout due to the intense demands of providing specialized care (Farmer et al., 2005).
- b) **Limited financial resources to meet special needs:** Foster parents reported struggling with the financial burden of meeting the unique needs of children with disabilities or chronic illnesses. The additional costs associated with medical treatments, therapies, and specialized equipment placed a significant strain on foster families' resources (Swanke et al., 2016).
- c) **Lack of an accepting social environment:** Foster parents highlighted the challenges they faced in terms of social stigma and lack of understanding from their extended family, friends, and the broader community regarding the needs of children with disabilities (Starr & Foy, 2012). This lack of social support and acceptance further compounded the difficulties experienced by foster parents.
- d) **Insufficient access to specialist care and educational facilities:** The survey findings revealed that foster parents often struggled to access appropriate healthcare services, therapeutic interventions, and educational support for children with special needs. The lack of coordination between different service providers and the limited availability of specialized resources posed significant barriers to ensuring the optimal development and well-being of these children (Lauver, 2008).

SUPPORT REQUIRED

- a) **Enhanced cooperation with healthcare professionals, special educators, and psychologists:** Foster parents emphasized the crucial importance of establishing strong

collaborative relationships with professionals who have expertise in working with children with special needs. Regular communication, joint planning, and coordinated efforts between foster parents and specialists were identified as key factors in providing effective care and support.

- b) Additional financial assistance for therapy, medical aids, and developmental tools: The study highlighted the need for increased financial support to help foster parents meet the unique needs of children with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Participants stressed the importance of having access to funding for specialized therapies, medical equipment, and educational resources to promote the optimal development and well-being of these children (Swanke et al., 2016).
- c) Increased psychological support for foster parents and children: The emotional toll of caring for children with special needs was a prominent theme in the survey findings. Foster parents expressed the need for readily available psychological support services to help them cope with the challenges they faced and to promote the mental health and resilience of both themselves and the children in their care (Orme & Buehler, 2001).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of the challenges encountered by foster parents caring for children with special needs in Hungary. The increased workload, emotional strain, and financial burden highlighted by the participants reflect the complex demands placed on foster families in providing specialized care. These challenges are further compounded by the lack of an accepting social environment and insufficient access to appropriate healthcare and educational services.

From a sociological perspective, these findings illuminate the ways in which the foster care system is embedded within broader societal structures and influenced by prevailing cultural attitudes towards disability (Siebers, 2008). The stigma and lack of understanding faced by foster parents and children with special needs reflect the need for greater societal awareness and acceptance of disability as a natural part of human diversity (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

Moreover, the challenges identified in this study raise important questions about the adequacy of support provided to foster families caring for children with special needs. The ecological systems theory emphasizes the importance of considering the multiple levels of influence on child development and well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The findings suggest that there are significant gaps in the support available to foster parents at the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem levels, indicating a need for more comprehensive and coordinated efforts to address the unique needs of this population.

From a philosophical standpoint, the experiences of foster parents caring for children with special needs prompt us to reflect on the fundamental values and ethical obligations of society towards its most vulnerable members. The principle of social justice requires that all children, regardless of their abilities or circumstances, have access to the resources and support necessary for their optimal development and well-being (Rawls, 1971). The challenges faced by foster parents in meeting the needs of children with disabilities or chronic illnesses highlight the need

for a more equitable distribution of resources and support within the foster care system and society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences and challenges of foster parents caring for children with special needs in Hungary. The findings underscore the complexity of providing specialized care within the context of the foster care system and the broader societal factors that shape these experiences. The increased workload, emotional strain, financial burden, and lack of social support and access to appropriate services identified by foster parents highlight the urgent need for more comprehensive and coordinated efforts to support this vulnerable population.

By examining these challenges through a sociological and philosophical lens, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the ways in which the foster care system is embedded within broader societal structures and the ethical obligations of society towards its most vulnerable members. The findings emphasize the importance of promoting greater societal awareness and acceptance of disability, as well as the need for more equitable distribution of resources and support to ensure the optimal development and well-being of all children, regardless of their abilities or circumstances.

Moving forward, it is crucial that policymakers, practitioners, and researchers work together to address the challenges identified in this study and to develop more effective strategies for supporting foster parents and children with special needs. This requires a holistic approach that takes into account the multiple levels of influence on child development and well-being, as well as the broader societal factors that shape the experiences of this vulnerable population. By prioritizing the needs and rights of children with disabilities and chronic illnesses, and by providing foster parents with the resources and support they need to provide high-quality care, we can work towards creating a more just and inclusive society for all.

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