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THE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT LEVEL IN FOSTER FAMILIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR LEISURE TIME ACTIVITIES

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The Analysis of Social Support Level in Foster Families in the Context of Their Leisure Time Activities

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate whether there is a correlation between family social support and leisure time activities among adopted children in foster families. It has been assumed that the main factors determining leisure activities in foster families are social family ties, manifested in the form of a strong social support. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) has been used to measure the perception of support and only the first, out of three, family-related source was applied in the research. The study has been conducted from a youth perspective in the context of family leisure and family support and it has tested the types of leisure activities which the foster children and their parents participated in – core and balance. The study group consisting of youth aged 10-21 coming from the city of Poznan and its neighbouring areas. The results show that there is a correlation between family social support at all its levels (low, medium and high) and low/high core index levels both in girls and boys. These findings indicate that, from a youth perspective, core rather than balance family leisure involvement has a stronger relationship with family social support. There is a further need for experimental design in the form of an interventional program in order to effectively scan the casual effects of family support. The findings also suggest that further research is necessary to investigate the correlation between the foster families and individual leisure time activities undertaken by the adopted children.

Keywords: foster family, family leisure, core and balance family leisure, family social support.

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Introduction

The issue of organizing leisure time in foster families appears regularly in Polish and foreign scientific research, however it is usually rather a secondary aspect, concurrent to the analysis of pedagogical or economic issues related to bringing up a child in foster care. There is a noticeable insufficient number of proposals for practical solutions in the form of preventive leisure-time programs based on the potential of the local environment and cooperation of foster care providers with state and private institutions delivering services in the field of leisure-time activities. In Poland, research on this subject was conducted by, among others, Wałęcka-Matyja (2015), Ruszkowska (2013), Mańka & Ornacka (2011) and Kusio (1998). The situation in other countries seems to be much better. Many organized athletic sports programs are arranged by the Young Men's Christian Association, community centers, local parks and recreation departments, and nationally affiliated sports organizations. These programs allow foster family members for physical and socio-cultural activity through structurally organized practices. These venues may also offer other forms of physical activities such as swimming, martial arts, aerobics, dance, and weight training (e.g. Lee *et al.* 2010). Gilligan & Daly (2005) draw their attention to the importance of having friends by the children tested. Respondents who have well-developed peer relations present a higher level of participation in leisure time activities. They are more willing to participate in activities organized both at school as well as at home or in their neighbourhood. On the other hand, Fong, Schwab, & Armour (2006) prove that the child's increased level of participation in leisure-time activities after being placed in foster care is associated with their better frame of mind. The authors also conclude that maintaining continuity of activities in various fields, leisure time included, prior to and after referring a child to a foster family, minimizes the effects of disturbances caused by the life situation. In subsequent studies conducted by Gilligan (2007), the foster carers have been assigned the role of a kind of mentors and guides, contributing to the children's better changes in attitude and faster practical skills acquisition, also by participating in leisure time activities. Additionally, Gilligan (2012) underlines the significant role of foster parents in developing foster children's interests. The active attitude of an adoptive parent contributes to the child's positive attitude towards the undertaken forms of leisure time activities. The parents' involvement has a long-term educational and social impact. Similar observations are made by McMahan & Curtin (2013) suggesting that the involvement in social or sport activities of a child raised in a foster family enhances the development of friendly relations.

Studies on recreation and leisure-time benefits for the foster families have been categorized in terms of family positive and negative outcomes including family: stability, work familial and marital satisfaction, communication, interaction, cohesion, adaptability, functioning, stress, tension, conflicts (Orthner & Mancini, 1991). In 2001 Zabriskie & McCormick developed the Core and Balance Model

of Family Leisure Functioning. This model provides further understanding of the relationship between different types of family leisure and family life, including foster families. It is grounded in the system theory with particular focus on the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Functioning (Olson, 2000). Research using the Core and Balance Model has consistently found a positive relationship between foster family functioning and foster family leisure involvement (Poff *et al.*, 2010; Hornberger *et al.*, 2010; Agate *et al.*, 2009; Smith *et al.*, 2009; Swinton *et al.*, 2008; Freeman & Zabriskie, 2003; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). Core family leisure activities can take place in or around the home, are easily accessible, common and low in cost. Balance family leisure activities, in contrast, suggest varieties and novelties to core activities and are less frequently participated in (Smith *et al.*, 2009). When family members participate in core leisure they may feel closer to each other and experience increased connectedness and bonding. Core family leisure can help with emotional connection, tends rather to facilitate feelings of closeness, personal relatedness, family identity and bonding, foster family members may also often feel a sense of stability from engaging in core family leisure. In turn balance family leisure involvement provides the input necessary for families to be challenged, to develop, to adapt, to progress as a working unit and it helps enhance the adaptive skills necessary to navigate the challenges of family life in today's society (Poff *et al.*, 2010; Townsend, Van Puymbroeck, & Zabriskie, 2017).

Leisure time physical activity (LTPA) is a cornerstone of health and well-being and is an integral part of foster family leisure activities (FFLA). FFLA and LTPA levels also vary by socioeconomic status, which is particularly important in the context of foster families. Foster children with parents who have lower incomes tend to spend more time engaged in sedentary behaviours such as watching television. They also have lower non-school physical activity levels than children whose parents have higher incomes. These patterns reflect disparities in the environment, such as insufficient facilities, lack of programs and safety concerns.

A large group of researchers believe that the major factor determining any kind of FFLA in foster families is social ties, manifested in the form of a strong family social support (including Bin *et al.*, 2014; Sęk & Cieślak; 2012; Merrit, 2008; Reblin & Uchino, 2008; Schwarzer & Knoll, 2007; Moyers *et al.*, 2006). The hypothesis of the moderating influence of social support becomes particularly important in relation to the functioning of a foster family. The most important sources of support are considered to be natural ones such as family, friends and social groups, to which a child functioning in a foster family environment belongs. Researchers claim that perceived support, referring to the subjective sense of the potential availability of support, is a better predictor of well-being, coping with stress and the health of children in foster families, compared to the support received (including Wang *et al.*, 2019; Buszman & Przybyła-Basista, 2017; Olsson & Fritzell, 2017; Johnes 2014; Nakigudde *et al.*, 2009; Reblin & Uchino, 2008). Social support for young people who grow up in foster families, includes a wide

range of functions such as tangible support and provision of advice and guidance. Maintaining positive, close relationships between adoptive parents and adopted children helps in achieving balance in everyday life, builds a sense of personal well-being and above all plays an important role in adapting children to a new family environment, lessening the negative impact of stress and making it easier to deal with a new situation (Chamot & Pernerger, 2004; Bin *et al.*, 2014; Malkoc & Yalcin, 2015). This also has a great impact on family leisure time planning and arranging it together, for leisure is an important family cohesion factor, where the family is the first and most important educational environment for all its members (Crawford & Godbey, 2009).

The aim of this study was to determine the relationship between family social support and leisure-time activities undertaken by adopted children in foster families. Specifically, we hypothesized that the level of social support in foster families determines the leisure-time activities undertaken by their adopted children. Additionally, we assumed that there is a positive relationship between family support and core/balance family leisure activities in foster families.

Methodology

Participants

The study group has been selected in an arbitrary way to which the following criteria have been used: the form of custody over the child (foster families), the age of children (over 10), and the place of family residence (Poznan and its neighbouring area). The survey took place between September 2016 and April 2017. Participation was voluntary but the written consent was obtained from all the parents (or carers) of all the children involved.

The study was carried out among children from 73 foster families living in the city of Poznan and its neighbouring area. The children surveyed came mostly from the related families ($n = 57$, $n\% = 78.1$), then from non-professional families ($n = 10$, $n\% = 13.7$) and finally from professional families ($n = 6$, $n\% = 8.2$). Due to the construction of the questionnaire for children, the study covered only foster families in which there were 10 – 21 year old adolescents. There were a total number of 335 families living in the study area, thus a population of 21.8% of the families who met the criteria of the study group selection were surveyed. The study group consisted of 89 people (53 girls, aged $M = 15.2 \pm 2.71$ and 36 boys, aged $M = 14.1 \pm 2.524$). A total number of 383 children over 10 are brought up in foster families in the study area, and the number of respondents is 23.3% out of the adolescent group that meet the criteria of the study group selection.

The respondents most often attended gymnasium (40%) and usually lived in a large urban area (70.8%), whereas only 10% were residents of rural areas. The average length of a young person living in a foster family was 6.6 ± 4.72

years. At least half of them grew up in foster care for 6 or more years. Among the respondents, half were raised by two foster parents, and more than 40% by a single foster parent. The highest number of adolescents was foster children coming from foster-related families (68.5%), then professional (17%) and non-professional foster families (15%).

Procedures

The family leisure activities in the foster families diagnose and measure two types of family leisure patterns, core and balance. The study examined the types of leisure activities in which the foster families participated and how frequently they undertook them. In order to measure factors associated with FFLA, selected questions from the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) questionnaire were used (Currie *et al.*, 2008). The questions were about family relationships and the frequency of activities undertaken by the family together. Assessment used in this study was established using Cronbach's Alpha test, a measure of internal reliability (Cronbach, 1990). The reliability of the total was 0.88 and the values were 0.81, 0.87, 0.69, respectively. The scales have acceptable psychometric properties including evidence of construct validity, internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.89$) and test-retest reliability ($r = 0.85$).

The following activities are classified as the core family leisure activities: eating meals together, home-based indoor activities, games, hobbies and visiting family members/ neighbours. The balance family leisure activities include: spectator activities, community-based social activities, community-based special activities and outdoor activities. Respondents were asked to complete scales of estimated frequency and duration for each activity category. Scores for the core and balance activities were calculated by first multiplying the ordinal indicators of frequency and duration of participation in each category and then summing each category to provide a core and balance leisure family index. The results were interpreted in three standard normal categories: low, medium and high. The sten (standard ten) scale was used to obtain the middle interval of 50% and the extreme intervals of 25% of the population in the surveyed group.

To analyse the level of social support in the context of leisure time activities in the studied foster families the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) was used, a research tool proposed by Zimet and colleagues (Zimet *et al.*, 1988; Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000). The MSPSS was designed to assess perceptions of social support adequacy from three specific sources: family, friends and significant other. In this study, the first out of three sources - the family support - was used. This scale consists of four statements, which the surveyed children from foster families were asked to address, using the five-point Likert scale. The respondents gave answers by choosing one of the five choices ranked from completely disagree (1 point) to completely agree (5 points) (Cheng & Chan, 2004; Nakigudde *et al.*, 2009, Mazur 2013). Thanks to the use of the

score, a standardized scale in the range of 0-100 was developed (Mazur, 2013). The results were interpreted as follows: the number of points in the range of 0 - 65 meant poor perceived support, 66 - 85 points for medium perceived support, and 86 - 100 points for high perceived support.

Cronbach's coefficient-Alpha was obtained for the question's scale as a whole as well as for each family subscale. The reliability of the total was 0.88 and the value for the mentioned subscale was 0.87. Internal consistency rating for the scale was also acceptable $\alpha = 0.78$. These values indicate good internal consistency for the scale as the whole and for the chosen subscale.

The study was conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the local ethics committee (No. 1075/15). The study protocol was also approved by the Local Board of Ethics of Karol Marcinkowski University of Medicine Science, in Poznań.

Results

Table 1 presents the basic descriptive statistics for family social support and core and balance activities undertaken by the children and young people in the foster families.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

| characteristics | core index | | | balance index | | | foster family support | | |
|------------------------------|------------|-------|------|---------------|-------|------|-----------------------|-------|------|
| | total | girls | boys | total | girls | boys | total | girls | boys |
| minimum | 19 | 19 | 25 | 8 | 41 | 8 | 20 | 35 | 20 |
| lower quartile | 49.4 | 41.0 | 46.0 | 66.3 | 69.0 | 64.4 | 75.0 | 75.0 | 75.0 |
| marginal median | 57 | 58 | 54 | 73 | 73 | 71 | 80 | 80 | 85 |
| arithmetic mean | 57 | 58 | 56 | 70 | 72 | 68 | 82 | 83 | 81 |
| upper quartile | 65.9 | 66.0 | 66.6 | 78.6 | 78.6 | 77.8 | 90 | 90 | 95 |
| maximum | 88 | 88 | 88 | 95 | 88 | 95 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| standard deviation | 14.6 | 14.2 | 15.3 | 13.2 | 10.3 | 16.5 | 15.1 | 12.3 | 18.6 |
| coefficient of variation (%) | 25.5 | 24.4 | 27.3 | 18.8 | 14.4 | 24.2 | 18.4 | 14.9 | 23.0 |

Considering the core and balance indexes and parental support, the values of these features were found to be more variable for boys than for girls. Large differences between the characteristic values for boys and girls were recorded for the minimum value. The correlation between qualitative variables, i.e. between family social support and leisure time activities undertaken by the children surveyed, was determined by the coefficient of contingency C based on χ^2 statistics. The first variable of *family leisure activities* had two categories: core and balance; whereas the other variable of *family social support* had three categories: low,

medium and high. The categories of the two variables were mutually exclusive and comprehensive. Each cell in 2 by 2 coefficient contingency table reflected the number of respondents with a given combination of categories.

The study was conducted for all children surveyed as well as for girls and boys separately. The empirical value of $\chi^2 = 38.7$ and probability $p = 0.039$ were obtained. Then the contingency coefficient $C = 0.42$ was determined, assessing the correlation as weak. A detailed analysis of the formula of the chi-square statistics allowed to state the fact that the greatest influence on the correlation was between family support (low, medium and high), and the low and high core index levels (both in girls and boys). As to balance activities, such an impact occurred in girls only and only on the low and medium levels of the index.

On the other hand, when analysing the relationship between the mentioned qualitative variables separately for girls and boys, no correlation was found. The following were obtained: $\chi^2 = 17.3$ and $p = 0.069$ for girls and $\chi^2 = 13.2$ and $p = 0.212$ for boys.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the assumed effectiveness of foster family support on the level of undertaken family leisure activities in two dimensions: core and balance. The Core and Balance Model indicates that families participating more actively in FFLA show higher family cohesion and flexibility (Smith, Freeman & Zabriskie, 2009). Surprisingly, our data indicated that there is a rather low level of correlation between foster family support and undertaken leisure activities by young people in foster families. In other studies researchers have consistently reported direct relationships between core and balance family leisure involvement (see e.g. Freeman & Zabriskie, 2003). However, it must be said that the great number of the mentioned studies have been conducted among families, and yet little research has been carried out exclusively from the youth perspective (Backe-Hansen, Egelund, & Havik, 2010). Nevertheless, Zabriskie and Freeman (2004) indicate that family support and leisure involvement facilitate better family cohesion and adaptability, considering it to be valuable and practical.

Returning to the hypothesis that has been put forward at the beginning of the work, it should be stated that the level of social support of foster parents does not determine the leisure time activities undertaken by the adopted children in the families.

The recent study by Wilson and Dollman (2007) shows that the engagement of parents being actively involved in PA, together with their adolescents, strongly influences the level of LTPA. Moreover Dishman *et al.* (2009) have found that particularly female adolescents with high social support encounter lower declines in PA levels while having high self-efficacy. On the other hand, the study has

also indicated that when adolescents perceive a reduction in social support, their PA engagement decreases, even if their self-efficacy level remains high. Greater variable changes in core and balance index values as well as social support of foster parents have been found among boys than among girls due to the varied level of sensitivity to perceived support. In terms of gender effects, in Zimet *et al.* (1988) study, women have reported greater social support from their families and significant others than men. The findings may result from the fact that generally women are more willing than men to report their perceptions. Other study (James & James, 2004) claims that boys usually are stronger in mind and they feel more autonomous than girls who tend to have different help-seeking behaviours (Kullberg, 2005). Thus, the family that changes throughout the whole life span might be a constant source of support. Relationships change over time (Schofield, 2002; Merritt, 2008; Andersson, 2009; Leloux-Opmeer *et al.*, 2016) and specific situations i.e. new school, foster family-home atmosphere or events in a youth's life can change the direction, for better or worse (Schofield & Beek, 2005; Hedin, 2014).

Hedin (2014) and Fuentes *et al.* (2014) have found in their study that many adolescents feel bad in everyday life situations getting involved in quarrels and problems, in contrast they are happy during special events like celebrations or holiday trips and days they spend together with foster family having fun, doing things together like talking, having dinner and watching TV. Some child and adolescents report that they feel good while practicing in a hobby: music, sports or in other activities and also when they are supported by their foster parents.

Another study of Eather, Morgen, & Lubans (2013) shows that parental social support in PA enhances their children's PA behaviour. Similar effect has been found in adolescents by Lubans *et al.* (2015). But we must take into consideration that research in this field is rare. In Hagger *et al.* (2009) studies on the role of parents' support of LTPA were not sufficient enough and rather inconsistent, thus they assumed that an increase in support from parents would also increase the motivation to undertake LTPA. In a longitudinal study of inactive adolescent girls (Neumark-Sztainer *et al.* 2003), it was observed that when the girls received a high support from their parents (besides PE teacher and peers), their changes in PA behaviour were noticed. This support was one of the strongest and most consistent predictor. Based on the study by Bronikowski *et al.* (2016) we may conclude that one important goal could be achieved through the fact that parents together with their children participate in LTPA (such as walks, meals and visiting relatives together): this is simply a positive change in family social behaviours.

The greatest influence on correlation between family social support at all its levels (low, medium and high), and low/high level of core index has been observed both in girls and boys. From a youth perspective, these findings indicate that family support is stronger in core rather than in balance family leisure involvement. As for the balance index, this impact occurred only at low and medium levels and in girls only. Following Smith's idea (Smith *et al.*, 2009) we strongly believe that there

is a problem in most Polish families, which often struggle with lack of time and financial issues. Furthermore, these economic and usually social issues force them to undertake generally accessible and low-cost activities (Weitoft *et al.*, 2003), which seem to be essential to make a more valuable contribution to family life (Freeman & Zabriskie, 2003). Also, Shaw and Dawson (2001) have revealed that the parents' appreciation to spend time (here selecting core leisure activities) together with their foster children enhances their foster family cohesion. This suggests that core types of FFLA are significantly more important to foster families. It might also be the case that core activities are more appropriate to the positive interactions in a natural setting, making both parents and adolescents more comfortable in sharing their leisure time experience together. Furthermore, core foster family leisure involvement offers foster families an unobstructed, enjoyable venue in which family members can frequently interact at home or around it within small periods of time (Smith *et al.*, 2009). There was no correlation observed between the above-described quality variables for the tested girls and boys separately. In future studies it would perhaps be better if further research could be conducted and taken into consideration, yet for a larger representative group including foster parents' perspectives.

The limitations of this study are: a relatively small sample of adolescents from foster families and the fact that the scholars have only tested foster family support as a contribution to selected core and balance leisure activities. But it is worth mentioning that the present sample has been sufficient enough to examine and report relationships between foster family support and undertaken leisure time activities.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis of research results, some important conclusions have been drawn. There is a further need for experimental design in the form of an interventional program in order to effectively scan the casual effects of family support and LTPA and to extend follow-up tests over time. Moreover, the further research is necessary to investigate the causes of that weak correlation between the foster families and individual leisure time activities undertaken by the adopted children. This approach would allow researchers to analyse further relationships between foster family support and other family variables with more advanced statistical procedures. The findings from this research suggest that LTPA interventions for foster children should specifically take into consideration family as important sources of social support for general PA promotion that aims to increase PA levels. In terms of future research it would be useful to conduct a longitudinal validation of the casual relationships observed here.

Recommendations

There is a big need for educational interventions not only for kids but also for their foster parents. Educational, preventive and therapeutic classes, as well as an organization of occasional and integration meetings should be important elements of this strategy.

There is a need for institutional support which should be in the form of mandatory actions supporting foster families in the context of undertaking LTPA. It is recommended to organize trainings and workshops for representatives of municipal offices, informing them about the possibilities and obligations of local governments in promoting PA among foster families.

The most important recommendation for local authorities (and indeed for other organizations and institutions operating in the PA field) is the maintenance of sports and recreation infrastructure and recreation/leisure areas. These elements of an authority's scope of actions have proven to be of key importance in allowing residents to spend their free time actively.

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