

**EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF LAW 4538/2018
ON FOSTER CARE AND CHILD MENTAL HEALTH
OUTCOMES WITHIN THE GREEK CHILD PROTECTION
FRAMEWORK**

**ANÁLISE DA INFLUÊNCIA DA LEI 4538/2018 SOBRE OS
RESULTADOS DO ACOLHIMENTO FAMILIAR E A SAÚDE
MENTAL INFANTIL NO ÂMBITO DO QUADRO DE PROTEÇÃO
INFANTIL GREGO**

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Abstract

The implementation of the Greek Law 4538/2018 concerning the social institution of children's fostering is examined. It is based on a doctoral thesis aimed at identifying the best practices in promoting the de-institutionalization of minors to improve their mental health. A mixed-method approach was used, beginning with a quantitative survey that was sent to all Directors in Children's Homes across Greece. Four Children's Homes were found to be the exemplary child protection agencies in terms of fostering. The second phase of the quantitative research was carried out on their ongoing foster care cases. Semi-structured interviews conducted with nine (9) social workers who had undertaken these sixteen (16) children's foster care cases. The research revealed that long-term foster care for children between the ages of four-six (4-6) is widespread and often foster care leads to adoption and contact with biological family remains rare. Overall, the research argues for the urgent need for designing a unified foster care protocol across Greece to ensure consistency and effectiveness in child protection services.

Keywords: fostering, legislation, protection, de-institutionalization, Anynet

Resumo

Neste Texto é analisada a implementação da lei grega 4538/2018 relativa à instituição social de acolhimento de crianças. Baseia-se numa tese de doutoramento que visa identificar as melhores práticas na promoção da desinstitucionalização de menores para melhorar a sua saúde mental. Foi utilizada uma abordagem de método misto, começando com um inquérito quantitativo que foi enviado a todos os diretores de lares infantis em toda a Grécia. Quatro lares infantis foram considerados agências de proteção infantil exemplares em termos de acolhimento. A segunda fase da investigação quantitativa foi realizada sobre os seus casos de acolhimento em curso. Foram realizadas entrevistas semiestruturadas com nove assistentes sociais que tinham assumido estes dezasseis casos de acolhimento de crianças. A investigação revelou que a acolhimento familiar de longo prazo para crianças entre os quatro e os seis anos (4-6) é comum e, muitas vezes, o acolhimento familiar leva à adoção, sendo raro o contacto com a família biológica. No geral, a investigação defende a necessidade urgente de criar um protocolo unificado de acolhimento familiar em toda a Grécia para garantir a consistência e a eficácia dos serviços de proteção infantil.

Palavras-chave: acolhimento, legislação, proteção, desinstitucionalização, Anynet

Introduction

The Effects of Institutionalization on Children

Although the purpose of Residential Care has always been the protection of children who, for whatever reason, were removed from their family environment following a decision of the Minors' Prosecutor, the social phenomenon of institutionalization has mostly negative implications on them. Mental health experts argue that the overall development of children growing up in Children's Homes (CH) is not smooth for the reasons analyzed below (Allgurin & Enell, 2022; Julian et al, 2019; Kalyva, 2016; Sakellaropoulos & Lazaratou, 2001; Tsiantis, 2004).

Firstly, there are significant effects on children's psychosocial development, resulting in difficulties in the formation of their personal and social identity, and consequently in the incomplete acquisition of social skills that allow children to establish social relationships and interact effectively with the people around them, both in childhood and adolescence, and even in adulthood (Abatzoglou, 2021; Mizuki et al., 2021; Schacter et al, 2012).

Secondly, there are consequences for children's emotional development, where children placed in institutions in the early years of their lives lack sufficient stimulation, due to the absence of emotional bonding with their parents at the risk

of experiencing severe emotional deprivation. Thus, these children tend to develop behavioral disorders, such as anxiety disorder, phobias and panic attacks, due to the difficulty experienced. Moreover, they often have inability to express their emotions but also tend to develop personality disorders such as borderline or antisocial personality (Berrick et al., 2023; Edwards, 2016; Zeytinoglu et al., 2022).

Thirdly, there are implications on children's cognitive ability, which includes attention, speed of information processing, organization and logical thinking, memory, cognitive base and metacognition (Fore et al., 2019; Goldstein, 2018).

The main de-institutionalization model applied in Greece, is the «Care Model», which takes under consideration the family-school-community systems. According to the guidelines of the European Commission (2022) it is in the best interest of the children to be removed from CH and integrated into a family as well as into society in general. This model encourages the placement of the minor in fostering/foster care, which is one of the best alternatives for child protection (Abatzoglou, 2021; Broadhurst & Manson, 2019; De-institutionalization Guide.eu, 2018).

In addition, there is the «Model of Supported Semi-Autonomous Living», which can be applied to adolescents aged 15 years and above, which aims to enhance the independence and autonomy of adolescents within the community. To this end, semi-autonomous apartments have been built for minors to live in them as groups, with the support of educators and social workers. However, efforts so far for the transition of adolescents in these settlements have not been actualized, as their overall cost is considered high. (Farmakopoulou & Baltsioti, 2024; Unicef.org, 2022).

The Profile of the Persons Involved in Fostering and their Interaction

Studies exploring the reasons that led biological parents to either make the decision or consent to the placement of their child in a foster family -on a temporary or permanent basis- have revealed that they are primarily social and economic (Schofield & Beek, 2023; Lohaus, 2018). Biological parents may either lose custody or lose their parental rights following a court order. Examining the profile of biological parents, it was found that they usually are people with a vulnerable personality, low social, educational and economic level, fail to appropriately protect their children and often the parental relationship is conflictual (Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2024; Kounougeri-Manoledaki et al., 2019).

One of the main objectives of the social institution of fostering is to place minors in a suitable family environment, where they will receive support, they need to develop smoothly and be empowered in all areas of life, at an emotional, educational, psychological and spiritual level (Chateauneuf et al, 2017; Georgarou, 2016). Thus, children placed in foster care reap a variety of benefits, which are

primarily psycho-emotional, social and developmental (Brown et al., 2018; Midgley et al, 2021).

Social workers play an important role in all stages of fostering. The multiple dimensions of social work practice are briefly the following: a) the procedure of separation of the child from his biological family, b) the conduct of social research at the house of the prospective foster parents, c) the provision of training to the prospective foster parents, d) the gradual preparation of the prospective foster child with individual sessions on his placement in the new family and the school environment s/he will attend, e) the acquaintance and adaptation stage of the prospective foster parents with the prospective foster child, f) the placement of the foster child in the foster family's home and g) the supervision of foster care (Barter & Lutman, 2015; Farmakopoulou & Baltsioti, 2024b; Tsetoura, 2020; Peraki, 2018).

Foster children have mostly had painful experiences within their biological families, where they are usually associated with physical, emotional, verbal and/or sexual abusive behaviors that affect their socio-emotional development and mental health. Many children have also experienced conflictual divorce, domestic violence, parental substance abuse or incarceration of one of both parents (Georgiadis, 2021; Kalyva, 2016; Welch et al, 2018).

It is also common for foster children that they have lived for a long period of time in conditions of poverty and neglect, and subsequently to have lived at an impersonal institutional environment, resulting in experiencing double trauma and therefore they constitute a vulnerable population at risk (Abatzoglou, 2021; Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2023; Kallinikaki, 2021).

The Current Legislative Framework concerning the Institution of Fostering in Greece

The institution of fostering was established in Greece in law 2082/1992. It has been noticed that a large proportion of minors who have been removed from their families reside in CH, mainly due to the complexity of the process. Therefore, the adoption of the new legislative framework 4538/2018 has as its main objective the development of the conditions that allow the shortest possible stay of minors in CH, as well as their temporary or permanent placement in an appropriate family context, to enable them to develop their full potential. Through this Law 4538/2018 (Government Gazette A 85/16.5.2018, the National and Special Registers of Minors, prospective and approved foster parents as well as the Anynet information system were created for the first time in Greece (Peraki, 2018; Seferidis, 2022).

All registered CH, in the Public and Private Sector, must keep the Special Register of Minors, in which specific data for each of the minors they accommodate is recorded within forty-eight (48) hours of their admission to it. The CH should draw up an Individual Family Rehabilitation Plan for each minor registered in the National Register of Minors, which includes a comprehensive proposal for the rehabilitation

of the minor, based on his/her individual needs and best interests (Joint Ministerial Decision D11/oik. 31931/1272, Government Gazette B 3329/8.8.2020). This plan should be prepared and entered into the Special Register for Minors by the Child Protection Agency within ninety (90) days of the date of the minors' admission to the facility. The National Centre for Social Solidarity maintains these two Registers (Gotsis et al., 2020; Koutra et al., 2023).

According to Law 4538/2018, candidate foster parents must meet certain eligibility requirements/criteria, have submitted the necessary documents, have a positive outcome of the social research conducted by the allocated social worker and successfully complete the specialised training to be registered in the Special and National Register of candidate foster parents (Anynet, 2023; Peraki, 2018). The foster care and adoption information system, Anynet.gr, has a nationwide reach and was created for all the procedures to be reliable and to facilitate the de-institutionalization process (Anynet, 2023; Hellenicparliament.gr, 2018).

Materials and Methods

Purpose and Objectives of the Research Study

The goals of this research study are twofold. On the one hand, it concerns the investigation of the application of the institution of foster care by Children's Homes (CH). On the other hand, it concerns the compliance with the time limits and procedures of the legal framework for foster care (Law 4538/2018) at every stage of the foster care process. Both categories of CH are included (public institutions and private non-profit institutions). In addition, the aim of the research is to highlight the Best Practices of the four selected CH in the implementation of the child fostering institution, that meet most of the inclusion criteria in accordance with European standards. The identification of Best Practices in fostering aims to enable other CH that are experiencing difficulties in implementing this institution to adopt them, with the goal of improving the deinstitutionalization program and the best interests of children.

Use of Mixed Research Methodology

A mixed methodology was used. Specifically, quantitative research was conducted first, and the findings and criteria set out in the Good Practice admission criteria of CH led to qualitative research.

More specifically, the selection of the four CH that emerged as the Best Practices CH was based on: a) the research findings of the quantitative research with the Directors, b) the chronology of the establishment and operation of the Structures, c) their long experience in implementing the child foster care system, and d) the implementation of protocols and the use of special methods.

Identification of Criteria for Exemplary Standards of Best Practices in Fostering

Until the time of conducting this thesis, there was no official evaluation process for CH in Greece, and therefore the researcher defined the following inclusion and exclusion criteria of CH. In particular, the criteria that CH had to meet to be identified as Exemplary Standards of Good Practices were as follows. To:

1. Implementation of Law 4538/2018 regarding the application of the institution of fostering the minimum the last three (3) years.
2. Compliance with the time limits set by the Law at each stage of the foster care process.
3. It has drawn up a thorough foster care Protocol for each stage of foster care process, which complies with all the criteria and specifications set out in the Law, including the recording of strategies for managing difficult foster care cases.
4. Take seriously the recommended child-foster parent match suggested by the electronic system Anyonet but also ensures that this is the proper matching process.
5. Social workers focus on the gradual establishment of a relationship between foster parents and the child during the adjustment phase before and after the child has been put at the foster care family.
6. It has a minimal or zero failure rate of fostering cases.
7. It promotes the fostering of siblings into one foster care family.
8. Regular supervision and telephone communication with the foster parents and the child is carried out for the first three (3) years.
9. The foster parents express their satisfaction with the overall foster care process.
10. The CH implements fostering from the first quarter of the children's admission.
11. The foster parents express their satisfaction with the placement of the foster child in their family.
12. The child expresses satisfaction with the placement in the specific foster care family.
13. The number of children placed in foster care families has increased significantly or doubled since the law (4538/2018) came into force.

In order one CH to be considered as a Good Practice placement, it must meet at least 10 of the above 13 criteria. The two criteria that were not applied by the two public sectors, CH, were:

- a) that the number of children placed in foster care had not increased or doubled since the entry into force of Law 4538/2018, and b) that siblings were not placed in the same foster family. The two CH which belong to the category of private sector non-governmental organizations did not apply to the following three criteria:
a) the number of children placed in foster families did not increase or double since

the entry into force of the Law, b) they did not provide training for prospective foster parents, and c) they did not supervise foster families.

Quantitative Research Process

The first part of the quantitative research, which was addressed to CH Directors throughout Greece, used the method of online research via Google Form, (self-report questionnaire completed via email), as it saved resources, made it easy to find participants, provided access to remote areas, and allowed participants to choose when and where to complete the questionnaire. Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the personal distribution of questionnaires was not feasible, and online communication was necessary to comply with social distancing, hygiene, and safety measures. Once all the necessary procedures had been completed and permission to conduct the survey had been granted, the ad hoc questionnaire was sent to the entire sample of directors, i.e., all public and private non-profit CH, as the aim of the quantitative research was to obtain an overall picture of the children's fostering situation throughout Greece.

In the second part of the quantitative research, the online survey method was also used via Google Form, where four (4) case studies of child fostering from each selected Best Practices CH (two from the public sector and two from non-governmental organizations), i.e., sixteen (16) cases of children's fostering. The questionnaires completed by all foster care mothers in the 16 foster care cases, where all foster care mothers participated, i.e., the positive response rate was 100%.

Quantitative Research Tools and Pilot Study

In the quantitative research with CH Directors throughout Greece, a self-reported anonymous questionnaire was created with thirty-seven (37) questions, mainly closed-ended and some open-ended, regarding the scope and implementation of the foster care system. The questionnaire was sent to CH directors throughout Greece via Google Forms. The first twenty-four (24) questions of the questionnaire concerned the implementation of the foster care system by CH staff, and the remaining eleven (11) questions focused on issues concerning foster parents. The scales used to formulate the questions were mainly dichotomous and multiple choice. The dichotomous scales included questions that accepted one of two suggested answers. The multiple-choice scales included questions that could be answered with one or more of the multiple suggested answers. Some of the questions asked were as follows: a) What are the ages of the children for whom you usually apply the foster care institution in your CH (possible answers were given to choose only one), b) Do you complete the Individual Family Rehabilitation Plan for the child in your CH, c) Which types of fostering are most commonly used in your CH (possible answers were given to choose up to two).

The aim of this questionnaire was to gain knowledge about how the institution of foster care is implemented through the lived experience of foster parents and to highlight their suggestions to improve this process. The analysis of the quantitative survey data in the foster parents' questionnaire was based on descriptive statistical analysis and was conducted using the special statistical tool (SPSS Statistics 26). The appropriate categorical variables were combined in pairs and cross tabulation analysis of the research questions and hypotheses was conducted using the χ^2 (Chi-square) test, which shows the dependence or non-dependence of the variables.

In the second part of the quantitative research, a second self-reported anonymous questionnaire was created and distributed to foster parents. It was administered using an online survey via Google Form, in which sixteen (16) foster mothers were asked to answer thirty-seven (37) questions, mainly close-ended and a few open-ended, about the implementation of fostering. Some indicative questions were: a) In which year did you apply for the fostering of this particular child (where various answers were given to choose only one), b) When did you join the Special and National Register of prospective foster parents (where respondents were asked to select only one answer) and c) Did you participate in the Education and Training Program for prospective foster parents (where respondents were asked to select only one answer).

In the quantitative part of the study, a pilot study was conducted in two Directors in CH, one in a public sector and one in private, as well as in two foster parents, where the ad hoc questionnaires were used. Some slight changes in the formulation of two questions have been made and one question was omitted. The duration of the completion of both questionnaires was forty (40) minutes.

Quantitative Data Analysis of the two Questionnaires

The quantitative research was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. The initial analysis of quantitative data (both in the questionnaire for directors and foster parents) was based on descriptive statistical analysis. The research variables were analyzed descriptively through the analysis of measures of central tendency (frequencies, percentages, cumulative frequencies, graphs, frequency tables). To analyze the research questions and hypotheses, the appropriate categorical variables were combined in pairs, and a cross-tabulation analysis was performed. To ensure the validity of the results in this study, the chi-square test was used. An example of the chi-square method is given to the results section below.

Qualitative Research Process, Pilot Study and Analysis

The Case Study method was used, which belongs to qualitative research. The Case Study consisted of four (4) CH, two from each category (two from the public and two from the private sector). The participants were social workers, women and men, with many years of working experience in CH. The nine (9) participating social

workers analyzed their experience on the implementation of Law 4538/2018 on child foster care in general and the use of the electronic information system AnyNet, but also specifically referring to the same sixteen (16) children's foster care cases to which the sixteen (16) participating foster parents referred and to any modifications they suggested to improve the child foster care processes. The semi-structured interviews with social workers included fourteen (14) open-ended questions, and the duration of each semi-structured interview was approximately forty-five minutes (45 minutes). Some of the questions were: a) please describe how and when the Individual Family Rehabilitation Plan is completed for a child staying at the CH, b) Describe the criteria for a child to be included in the foster care program at CH and c) Describe the frequency of foster care for siblings in the same family.

The following three (3) main themes emerged from the thematic analysis: a) implementation of procedures at all stages of fostering, b) compliance with time limits for the completion of each stage of fostering and c) issues concerning foster parents, which will be analyzed below. As will also be presented succinctly below, the first axis included six (6) thematic subsections, the second three (3) subsections and the third axis four (4). Qualitative research was analyzed using Thematic Analysis, which revealed three thematic axes.

In the qualitative research of this study, a pilot study was conducted, in which the researcher conducted two semi-structured interviews with two social workers who worked in other CH from the four selected ones. They responded adequately and no questions needed to be rephrased or removed. One participant suggested adding a question which was considered important and was therefore added to the study.

Restrictions of the research study

The present study was conducted in the academic year 2021-2022 with the significant limitation of the SARS Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in conducting quantitative research with the foster parents, instead of semi-structured interviews as it was originally designed.

In addition, due to the fact that this study not only utilized mixed methodology, where the quantitative led to qualitative, but also consisted of three different samples: (a) directors, (b) foster parents and (c) social workers, as "best practices" of fostering children from exemplary CH were highlighted, based on the adherence to specific criteria, more advanced statistical analyses was not feasible. Therefore, the main disadvantage of this study is the non-generalizability of its results.

Ethics

The purpose and the identity of the researcher were disclosed to all study participants as well as the supervisor's email and contact number. In addition, all necessary permits for conducting the research were ensured. Moreover, all the necessary steps for keeping the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were taken to ensure these elements by not disclosing the personal data of the respondents or the organizations they worked for. In addition, participation in the research was voluntary, and all participants (directors of the designated CH, foster parents, and social workers of the selected CH) signed a consent form for this research study.

Results of Quantitative Survey with Foster Parents

Most foster parents (82%) noted that they belong to the category of married couples without children. Half of the foster parents said that they belong to the age group of 35-45, while the second most common age group was that of 46-56 years old. The foster parents were asked about the age group of the foster child that they have taken up in their own family and as is shown in figure 1, most of them (56%) reported that they preferred preschool children (4-6 ages).

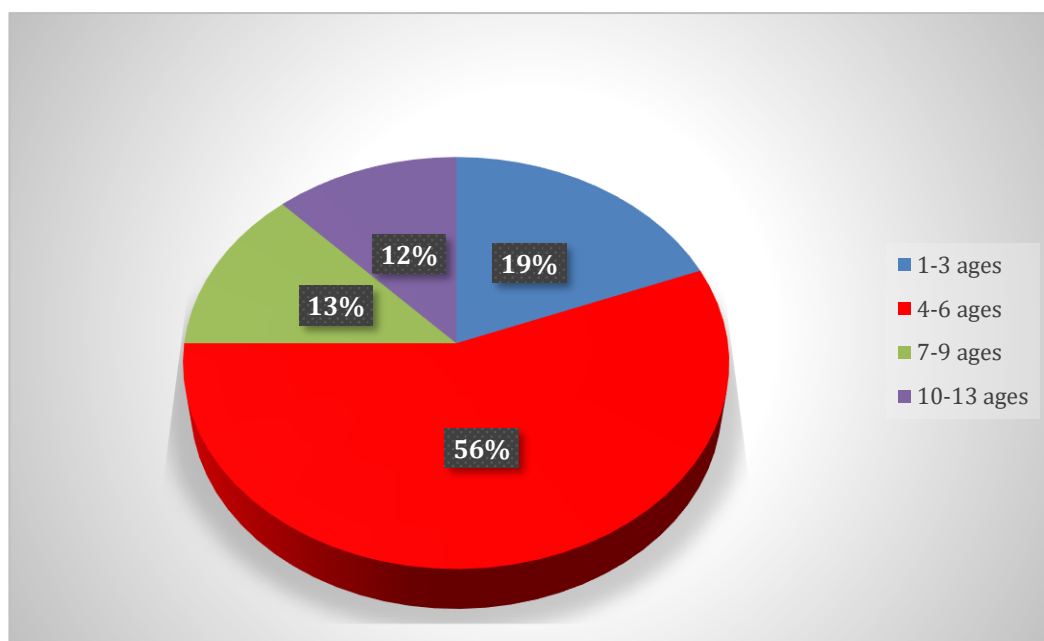


Figure 1. What is the age group of the foster child you have taken up

Many foster parents (65%) reported that they have rejected several connections with a minor child due to the faults of the Anynet online system. More specifically, the prospective foster parents stated that Anynet had matched them with a child who had either health problems or a psychiatric disorder, while they had explicitly stated to the allocated social worker that they wished to take over the fostering of a healthy child.

As far as foster parents' wishes and intentions, most foster parents (82%) opt for long-term fostering. Therefore, the transition of a child from the fostering institution into the institution of adoption by the same foster family is very frequent (88%). Most foster parents (75%) reported that they do not maintain contact between the foster child and his/her biological parents, mainly because of lack of interest from his/her biological environment. Regarding the duration of the adjustment period that was needed in order for the foster child to be adjusted in their family, the most common answer of the foster parents was that of 11-16 days, as can be seen in the following table 1.

Table 1.

How long does the adjustment period last?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 11-16 days	5	31,3	31,3	31,3
17-22 days	1	6,3	6,3	37,5
23-28 days	1	6,3	6,3	43,8
3 months	1	6,3	6,3	50,0
5 months	3	18,8	18,8	68,8
9 months	1	6,3	6,3	75,0
1 year	2	12,5	12,5	87,5
2 years	2	12,5	12,5	100
Total	16	100,0	100,0	100,0

Most foster parents (70%) replied that they had participated in the education and training program for the implementation of fostering. The most common way of fostering (88%) was the temporary assignment of the child's custody by a contract between the CH -that had custody of the child- and the prospective foster parents. Furthermore, several foster parents reported that they have regular supervision (once a month) and telephone contact with the social workers, which they find a

very helpful process for them and the child. When this takes place most foster parents (83%) stated that it results in successful fostering. Lastly, most parents (80%) explained that when they had been properly prepared at all stages of the fostering process by social workers, they had successful fostering.

As fore-mentioned to analyze the research questions and hypotheses, the appropriate categorical variables were combined in pairs, and a cross-tabulation analysis was performed. An example of the chi-square method is the following. As is shown in table 2. for the third (3) question, "How long has the foster care system been in place in your CH" and the ninth (9) question, "When is a child registered in the Special Registry from the day of admission to your CH", as observed from the total number of responses in the 5-7 years category, 57.1% responded that they register children in the Special Register within 48 hours of their admission, while 42.9% responded within 24 hours. In addition, CH that have been implementing the foster care system for 8-10 years responded that registration in the Special Register takes place within 48 hours, with a percentage of 40%. It is interesting to note that the CH that implemented the foster care system for 2-4 years register children in the Special Register within 24 hours and 48 hours, with the same percentage of 42.9%. As can be seen from the findings, this specific combination of questions is another prerequisite for identifying CH that belongs to Best Practices in relation to the first research hypothesis. The chi-square test χ^2 showed that the period during which the foster care institution is applied to a CH does not depend on when a child is recorded in the Special Registry, for all CH in the sample (Pearson's $\chi^2 = 3.898$) p-Value = 0.58 > 0.05.

Table 2.

How long does the fostering apply in your CH and 9. When is a child registered in the Special Register from the day of admission to your CH

			9. When is a child registered in the Special Register from the day of admission to your CH?					Total
			ΣΕ 24 ΩΡΕΣ	ΣΕ 48 ΩΡΕΣ	ΣΕ 72 ΩΡΕΣ	ΣΕ 120 ΩΡΕΣ	ΑΛΛΟ	
% within 2-4	Count		9	9	2	1	0	21
3. How long has fostering been applied in your CH?	% within 3. How long does fostering apply in your CH?		42,9%	42,9%	9,5%	4,8%	0,0%	100,0%
% within 9. When is a child registered in the Special Register from the day of admission to your CH?	% within 9. When is a child registered in the Special Register from the day of admission to your CH?		64,3%	56,3%	50,0%	100,0%	0,0%	58,3%
	% of Total		25,0%	25,0%	5,6%	2,8%	0,0%	58,3%
3. How has Children's Fostering been in place in your CH?	Count	5-7	3	4	0	0	0	7
	% within 3. How long does fostering apply in your CH?		42,9%	57,1%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	100,0%
	% within 9. When is a child registered in the Special Register		21,4%	25,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	19,4%

	from the day of admission to your CH? % of Total	8,3%	11,1%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	19,4%
8-10	Count % within 3. How long does fostering apply in your CH? % within 9. When is a child registered in the Special Register from the day of admission to your CH? % of Total	1 20,0%	2 40,0%	1 20,0%	0 0,0%	1 20,0%	5 100,0%
		7,1%	12,5%	25,0%	0,0%	100,0%	13,9%
		2,8%	5,6%	2,8%	0,0%	2,8%	13,9%
Other	Count % of Total	1 2,8%	1 2,8%	1 2,8%	0 0,0%	0 0,0%	3 8,3%
Total	Count % within 3. How long does fostering apply in your CH? % within 9. When is a child registered in the	14 38,9%	16 44,4%	4 11,1%	1 2,8%	1 2,8%	36 100,0%
		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Special Register from the day of admission to your CH? % of Total	38,9%	44,4%	11,1%	2,8%	2,8%	100,0%
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Cross-tabulation table for the question "How long has the Foster Care System been in place in your CH?" and the question "When is a child registered in the Special Register from the day of admission to your CH?".

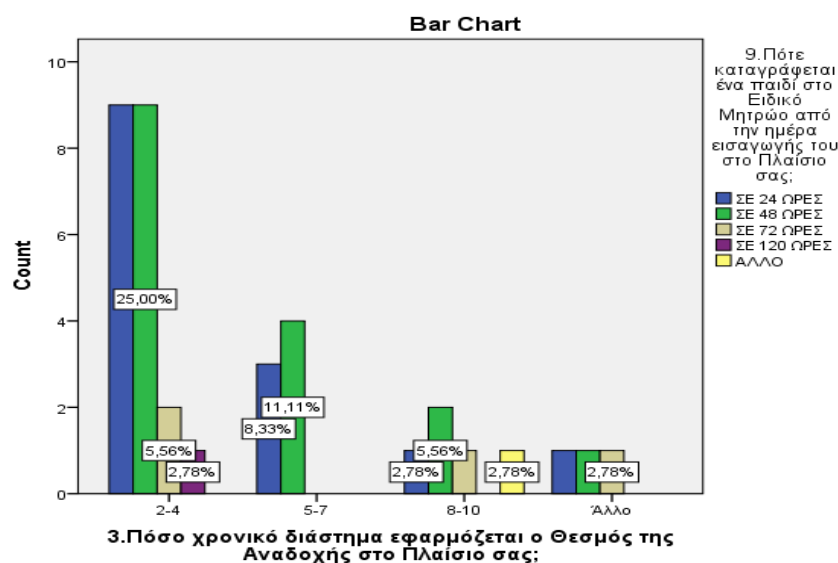


Figure 2. total number of CH for the four categories

The above bar chart shows the percentages of the total number of CH for the four categories, depending on the length of time the foster care system has been in place in relation to when a child is registered in the Special Register from the day of admission to CH.

Results of Qualitative Research

As mentioned above, the primary axis concerns the implementation of the procedures at all stages of fostering and consists of six (5) sub-themes. The first sub-theme of the primary axis was the criteria for the inclusion of a child living in a CH in the foster care program. All participant social workers stated that most children living in the CH they work in do not meet the criteria for adoption. The primary criterion that most participants mentioned is that biological parents are unable to care for their child due to multiple problems they may face such as

substance abuse, health issues or due to an abusive environment. The second sub-theme is the frequency of putting siblings in the same foster family. The third sub-theme is difficulties in using the electronic system Anynet for the best matching of the foster child to the foster parents. Six out of the nine (6/9) social workers reported that their first concern was to strengthen the sibling bond and place siblings in the same foster family. The fourth sub-theme is difficulties managing strategies at all stages of the fostering process. Although most social workers (7/9) stated that they sometimes apply strategies for managing difficulties at all stages of the fostering process, they highlighted the urgent need of in-service specialized training in these issues. The fifth sub-theme is the new mandates. Registration in the Special and National Register of all minors accommodated in CH in Greece is being carried out. The sixth sub-theme was devoted to the adjustment of foster children in the mainstream school. All social workers claimed that this issue is crucial, since foster children often present behavioral problems in school environment. It is crucial to make every effort for close collaboration between the school staff and the allocated social worker in the foster family.

The secondary axis referred to the compliance with time limits for the completion of each stage of fostering included the following three sub-themes. The first sub-theme was about the completion of the social survey. All social workers in the four (4) exemplary CH reported that they adhere to the time limits of conducting the social survey (within three months) at the foster parents' houses. The second sub-theme related to the training done to the foster care of parents. The mandatory thirty-hour training of prospective foster parents -on specific thematic areas- which is conducted by mental health professionals and legal advisors is implemented. The third sub-theme referred to the Individual Family Rehabilitation Plan for foster children. Most CH are drawing up the Individual Family Rehabilitation Plan of the minor, within three months from his admission.

The third axe concerns issues related to foster parents and includes four sub-themes. The first sub-theme is the criteria applied by social workers for selecting parents who can become foster parents. The thorough evaluation of foster parents by social workers is highlighted, as they apply clear criteria for approving or rejecting them. The second sub-theme is related to the common age group of children being fostered. It was observed that most adolescents remain in CH because foster parents prefer younger children. The third sub-theme concerns the type of fostering. The most common type of children's fostering that is preferred by foster parents in Greece is the long-term care. The fourth sub-theme concerns the supervision of foster parents. Almost all social workers (8/9) reported that the frequency of supervision of foster families is carried out according to the age and

needs of the foster child as well as the extraordinary events that may occur in the foster family.

Discussion

It appears that efforts are being made to de-institutionalize minors from CH in Greece due to the implementation of the new Law 4538/2018, aiming at the harmonization with the requirements of the European Union. Although fostering and adoption are two different institutions worldwide, in Greece, in many cases fostering a child evolves into adoption by the same family, as often the foster parents are childless.

The social workers, during the conduct of the social survey at the foster care parents' home, the individual interviews with each foster care parent and the couple interviews that they carry out, make every possible attempt to explore thoroughly the motivation of prospective parents to become foster parents. This finding is confirmed in relevant literature (Abatzoglou, 2021). The importance of in-service training is emphasized and is confirmed in literature worldwide (Brown et al, 2018; Midgley et al, 2021; Peraki, 2018; Tsetoura, 2020). The protagonist role of social workers in all stages of fostering is noted by several practitioners and academics (Barter & Lutman, 2015; Farmakopoulou & Baltsioti, 2024b).

Close cooperation with foster parents is also crucial. Collaborative strategies can bring about effective outcomes in the special educational needs process (Kounougeri-Manoledaki et al., 2019). Children under child protection need therefore special attention from all professionals involved to bring about the holistic management of these cases in the school environment and to avoid the appearance of comorbid child psychiatric disorders (Cherry & Orme, 2019).

Practical Implications

There is a critical need for adequate staffing with scientific personnel at all agencies involved as well as for receiving specialized in-service training. It is also of paramount importance to help foster care parents to understand that the purpose of the institution of fostering is not to lead to the adoption of these children. In opposition, it is critical to comprehend that the aim of fostering is to offer a safe and comfortable home on a temporary basis, until their biological parents can take them back to their home.

Moreover, the role of the social worker in foster care supervision is of paramount importance. It is the connecting link and provides empathy, encouragement and the support required to the minor, to the foster family that the child has been placed with, and to the allocated social worker. Thus, it contributes

to a harmonious coexistence, to the child's school attendance and the safeguarding of the child's best interest.

It is of paramount importance the existence of a multidisciplinary team which would intervene immediately and deal effectively with foster children's emotional difficulties. This team should consist of the school social worker and the school psychologist, including the teaching staff and the director of the school unit as well as the child protection allocated social worker who would work together -on an external basis- with the child psychiatrist. It is crucial to make every effort for close collaboration between the professionals involved in fostering and the foster parents.

Restrictions on the Research Study

The present study was conducted in the academic year 2021-2022 with the significant limitation of the SARS Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in conducting quantitative research with the foster parents, instead of semi-structured interviews as it was originally designed.

In addition, due to the fact that this study not only utilized mixed methodology, where the quantitative led to qualitative, but also consisted of three different samples: (a) directors, (b) foster parents and (c) social workers, as "best practices" of fostering children from exemplary CH were highlighted, based on the adherence to specific criteria, more advanced statistical analyses was not feasible. Therefore, the main disadvantage of this study is the non-generalizability of its results.

Suggestions for Future Research

It would be beneficial for future research to build on the findings of this study and conduct a meta-analysis. Also, research that focuses on the views and lived experience of teenagers placed in foster care would be very interesting. This could be done through a quantitative and/or qualitative survey of the minors, as they are going through all stages of fostering, where the emotional state, problems and obstacles they face in their fostering process could be thoroughly explored.

Conclusion

The minors who grow up in a family context have better psychosocial and cognitive development, compared to the minors who live in children's homes. Thus, the immediate implementation of the social institution of foster care is of paramount importance. The creation of a Unified Protocol for foster care and its adherence by all CH in Greece should also be implemented. There is also an urgent need for adequate specialized staff such as social workers not only in the child protection system but also in the school context. Lastly and possibly most

importantly, the social inclusion of all students in the school environment, through a holistic approach and close cooperation between the interdisciplinary school team and external specialized professionals such as psychiatrists, the family and the community are vital.

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Declaration of interest statement

The authors do not have any conflict of interest in the submitted manuscript. We agree to comply with the Ethics and Malpractice Policy.

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Legislation

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"Determination of the procedure, the competent bodies, the duration of Fostering and any other relevant matter concerning the connection of the minors registered in the National Register of Minors with the foster parents and prospective adoptive parents who are foster parents registered in the National Register of Candidate Foster Parents and in the National Register of Candidate Foster Parents respectively'.

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