

FOSTER FAMILY AND REUNIFICATION: DECISION-MAKING SUPPORTED BY THE SARP

*FAMÍLIA ACOLHEDORA E REUNIFICAÇÃO:
A TOMADA DE DECISÃO APOIADA NO INSTRUMENTO SARP*

*FAMILIA DE ACOGIDA Y REUNIFICACIÓN:
TOMA DE DECISIONES APOYADAS EN EL INSTRUMENTO SARP*

Rachel Fontes Baptista ⁽¹⁾

Maria Helena Rodrigues Navas Zamora ⁽²⁾

João Paulo Delgado ⁽³⁾

RESUMO

No Brasil, a família acolhedora é uma política pública com a função de garantir cuidados provisórios e proteção às crianças e adolescentes com direitos negligenciados. A partir de intervenção judicial, esses meninos e meninas saem do ambiente violador e seguem para outra família, não adotiva, que os apoiará no processo de reunificação familiar. Entretanto, se observa a carência de instrumentos científicos estruturados para subsidiar a tomada de decisão relativa ao retorno. Este estudo objetiva, por meio da utilização de um instrumento adaptado para o sistema de acolhimento familiar, o SARP, avaliar a qualidade das relações entre crianças e seus responsáveis, em dois casos, no intuito de refletir a respeito da tomada de decisão sobre a reunificação. A discussão dos casos se apoiou, principalmente, em autores da psicanálise e psicologia do desenvolvimento. Como resultado, foi observada a necessidade de maior investimento em

⁽¹⁾ Doutora em psicologia pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). Psicóloga clínica, assistente técnica e perita judicial (SEJUD/TJRJ), Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0143-409X> — email: rachelbta@gmail.com

⁽²⁾ Doutora em psicologia pela Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). Professora da PUC-Rio, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2929-3268> — email: zamoramh@gmail.com

⁽³⁾ Doutor em ciências da educação pela Universidade de Santiago de Compostela. Professor na Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Porto, Portugal.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6977-8214> — email: pdelgado@ese.ipp.pt

O terceiro autor teve financiamento para este trabalho por meio do instituto público Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT), no âmbito do projeto UIDB/05198/2020 do Centro para a Investigação e Inovação em Educação (inED). <https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/05198/2020>

políticas públicas inclusivas para subsidiar o contexto do acolhimento, assim como em instrumentos que possam amparar a tomada de decisão. Conclui-se que permanece o desafio de se priorizar avaliações consistentes no âmbito do acolhimento familiar.

Palavras-chave: família acolhedora; reunificação; tomada de decisão.

ABSTRACT

In Brazil, the foster family is a public policy with the role of ensuring temporary care and protection for children and adolescents with neglected rights. After judicial intervention, these boys and girls leave the violating environment and go to a non-adoptive family, which will support them in the process of family reunification. However, there is a lack of structured scientific instruments to support decision-making regarding return. This study aims, through the use of an instrument adapted for the foster care system, the SARP, to evaluate the quality of relationships between children and their guardians, in two cases, with the aim of reflecting on decision-making regarding reunification. The discussion of the cases was mainly based on authors from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology. As a result, the need for greater investment in inclusive public policies to support the reception context was observed, as well as in instruments able to support decision-making. It is concluded that the challenge of prioritizing consistent assessments in the context of family care remains.

Keywords: foster family; reunification; decision making.

RESUMEN

En Brasil, la familia de acogida es una política pública con la finalidad de garantizar atención y protección temporal a niños y adolescentes con derechos vulnerados. Luego de la intervención judicial, estos niños abandonan el entorno violador y se dirigen a otra familia, no adoptiva, que los apoyará en el proceso de reunificación familiar. Sin embargo, faltan instrumentos científicos estructurados que respalden la toma de decisiones sobre el retorno. Este estudio tiene como objetivo, mediante el uso de un instrumento adaptado al sistema de acogimiento familiar, el SARP, evaluar la calidad de las relaciones entre los niños y sus tutores, en dos casos, con el objetivo de reflexionar sobre la toma de decisiones en materia de reunificación. La discusión de los casos se basó principalmente en autores del psicoanálisis y de la psicología del desarrollo. Como resultado, se observó la

necesidad de una mayor inversión en políticas públicas inclusivas que apoyen el contexto de acogida, así como en instrumentos que puedan apoyar la toma de decisiones. Se concluye que persiste el desafío de priorizar evaluaciones consistentes en el contexto del cuidado familiar.

Palabras clave: familia acogedora; reunificación; toma de decisiones.

Introduction

Foster care is a form of protection, in the shape of a public policy, which is legally subsidized in Brazil (MDS, 2009; Pinheiro et al., 2024). In this model of childcare, through judicial intervention, the child leaves his or her environment and begins to live, temporarily, with another family, called a foster family, that does not envisage adoption. This arrangement, present in many countries, is intended to protect children with violated rights within a family environment, promoting and emphasizing their reunification and reintegration when possible (Baptista et al., 2019). In this sense, after the foster care period, the evidence converges on the need to return to a family (LaBrenz et al., 2020; Lindner & Hanlon, 2024).

Although Brazilian legislation sets a maximum time limit for remaining in foster care (Brasil, 1990), the decision to reunify can be made within a variable timeframe. Therefore, it is not always clear how and when the return will take place, since coming back to the original environment is only part of the process (Chartier & Blavier, 2021; LaBrenz et al., 2020). Thus, it is necessary to look carefully at some relevant factors in the return assessment cycle (Esposito et al., 2022; Jones & Jonson-Reid, 2023). Physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social aspects must be taken into account. In addition, it is essential to pay attention to the specifics of each case and encourage the protagonism of the subjects involved (Delgado & Baptista, 2020).

In order to think about reunification responsibly, the systemic assessment of the nucleus and the foster care environment has been validated (Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2024). However, there are gaps in this decision-making process regarding the best conditions for return (Poremba, 2021). The literature emphasizes the limitations of assessments relating to vulnerable children and the lack of validated scientific instruments (LaBrenz et al., 2023). The use of appropriate instruments, clear decision-making criteria and trained professionals are necessary to minimize damage in the reunification process (Sacur & Diogo, 2021).

In order to think about reunification responsibly, the systemic assessment of the environment of origin and that of foster care has been validated (Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2024). However, there are gaps in this decision-making process regarding the best conditions for return (Poremba, 2021). The literature emphasizes the limitations of assessments relating to children in vulnerability and the lack of validated scientific instruments (LaBrenz et al., 2023). The use of appropriate instruments, clear decision-making criteria and trained professionals are necessary to minimize setbacks in the reunification process (Sacur & Diogo, 2021).

When it comes to foster care, investment in reunification has proven fragile, as the process needs to begin even before the first intervention in the family of origin. In this sense, assessing family relationships can minimize the movement of children through the foster care system and their consequent re-victimization. A reunification with little support, which does not take into account the changes in the family of origin context, may cause more damage, with subsequent re-entry into the protection system (Hutz et al., 2019; Salvagni & Pedroza, 2021).

Another important aspect to be addressed is the quality of the assessment of relevant data during the foster care process and after family reunification (Esposito et al., 2022). In Brazil, what is observed is that follow-up after return lasts for no more than six months. After that, cases tend to get lost in the Rights Guarantee System (CONANDA, 2006), and families may be left without consistent support. Therefore, basing decisions on appropriate instruments can be an important way of considering the positive and negative points of reunification in a systematic way.

A consistent evaluation process uses multiple tools, valuing the ecological dimensions of family relationships (Koller et al., 2019). Active listening, support for conscious parenting and the enhancement of individual qualities and parenting skills must be considered (Everest Media, 2022). This practice, recognized in other countries, is part of a context that is not only preventive but also protective.

On the way back, finding the most appropriate time for a child to return to their environment or be referred to another resource is a challenge for professionals (Vanderfaillie et al., 2023). In practice, the assessment of certain aspects may exceed the abilities of social workers, not least because of the work overload. The time allotted by law may also be too short to reach a conclusion (Baptista,

2018). Thus, evaluation tools that include objective and subjective variables can support some opinions, strengthening decisions.

Based on the demand pointed out and the scarcity of suitable scientific instruments for evaluating the reunification process, this study aims, through the use of a scientifically validated instrument adapted for the foster care system, to evaluate the quality of relationships between children and their guardians, in two monitored cases, in order to support judicial decision-making on the reunification of children to their original environment. The quality of the parental and family relationship here can be translated into the ability of the guardians to meet the children's main needs in three areas: physical/biological, cognitive, and emotional/social (Lago & Bandeira, 2015), using the Parental Relationship Assessment System (SARP – Sistema de Avaliação do Relacionamento Parental) instrument.

This article is based on the post-doctoral report by the first author of this manuscript and the doctoral study by Lago (2012), which culminated in the construction of the instrument. The SARP went through several theoretical and empirical stages in its development and is not meant as an instrument exclusive to psychologists or even as a scale validated specifically for the legal context. It is an instrument that can be adapted to other contexts and situations in which there is a need to assess the parental relationship, close relationships with other caregivers or even with non-family caregivers, as long as the necessary adaptations are made (Lago, 2012; Lago & Bandeira, 2015). Therefore, this article highlights the importance of having assessment techniques available in the Brazilian legal context, in order to contribute to decision-making regarding the return of children to their family environment.

Method

Design

Based on the above, a qualitative study was carried out with two families in a family foster care service located in a municipality in the state of Rio de Janeiro. It should be emphasized that the research was not restricted to making a closed and definitive assessment, but was dedicated to elucidating dynamic aspects of the content, considering the socio-cultural determinants involved. The SARP is a flexible tool, with the possibility of collecting multiple pieces of information. In this way, it was possible to offer differentiated listening spaces suited to the

age groups chosen. The possibility of giving participants a voice, in a unique way, allowed them to express not only situations relating to family dynamics, but also feelings and questions beyond what was proposed (Maltais et al., 2019).

Participants

A sample of nine respondents was used – four children aged between five and twelve, and five adults. The adults answered the anamnesis interview and the semi-structured SARP interview. Drawing, writing and verbalization were used with the children. Speeches were recorded and then discarded.

For reasons of professional confidentiality, the respondents were named in alphanumeric sequence, with children in lower case and adults in upper case, as follows: E1, E2, E3, e4, e5, e6 (Family 1) and E7, E8 and e9 (Family 2). The participants were named as parents (guardian and non-guardian). In Family 1, E2 and E3 and in Family 2, E7 and E8 were elected as guardians. Families of origin and foster families are included in the same block. Thus, in the organization, they were named Family 1 and Family 2. Family 1 was made up of a biological father and mother ($n=2$), a son and daughter in their care ($n=2$), a foster carer ($n=1$) and a girl in foster care ($n=1$). Family 2 was made up of an affective mother ($n=1$), a foster family ($n=1$) and a child ($n=1$).

Data collection procedures

The identification of the location, names of professionals and families has been suppressed. The work program consisted of two major stages. The first concerned approaching the families and raising their awareness about taking part in the project. The second concerned the collection itself. The fieldwork began with prior contact with the coordinators of the foster family service. It was chosen based on the team's willingness to participate and on selecting families that fit the research profile: children aged between 5 and 12 in foster care. The meetings were scheduled in advance and took place in a private room.

The foster care service's professional partners made it possible for the researcher (first author) to get involved, facilitating contact with the families. With this mediation, it was possible to minimize problems such as the feeling of invasion, which is quite common when talking about losing or keeping custody of children.

Instruments

The research was based on the adapted use of the Technical Manual of the SARP instrument. Created to help in situations involving custody disputes in the courts, it could be adapted based on the materials published by those responsible for preparing the instrument. In this study, the SARP was adapted to assess relationships between families of origin and foster families, showing whether the children's main needs were being met in order to analyze the possibility of family reunification. This assessment can contribute to more careful decision-making, insofar as social workers are equipped for their work of supporting judicial decisions with data on the healthy development of children, such as affective aspects, care, protection, education, leisure and safety. It is worth highlighting the importance of listening to other participants in order to score the SARP and draw up the report. A representative of the family of origin and a representative of the foster family were elected to be the children's main guardians on the scale.

The SARP consists of an anamnesis, an interview, a child assessment protocol and a scale. There are three techniques applied to family members and children. The interviews and anamneses were directed at family members and guardians, while the children's protocol was answered by the children, and the scale was scored by the first author after listening to everyone involved, including the technicians. The information collected in the interviews was recorded, transcribed and systematized in the scales. At the end, the contents of the reports were discarded.

The anamnesis consists of data relating to the child, in which the informant tells the family's previous history. They are asked about the couple's history, the birth of the children and the child's development. The SARP interview script contains data on the informant, the child and items relating to the child. It asks about their routine, support network, setting limits, communication between guardians, and post-separation and intervention adjustments. The protocols for children are based on storytelling with real-life situations with which they can identify. They also give them the chance to better understand their tastes, routine, important aspects of life, family, care, worries and plans for the future.

Ethical procedures

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Estácio de Sá University (UNESA), with a Free and Informed Consent Form for the adults

and a Term of Assent for the children. The terms were approved, the pre-test was carried out and the instrument was adapted and applied. All the terms were presented to the interviewees and signed before data collection began.

Results

The option of presenting the results in itemized format, as shown in the instrument, was due to the intention of bringing out the content in a specific way, which is important for the subsequent holistic view of each case. By repeating some observations, it was possible to see their significance in the general context of decision-making.

Family 1

Family 1 was made up of E1 and E2 (parents), E3 (foster carer), e4 and e5 (siblings) and e6 (foster child). The child in foster care had been removed from her family of origin due to neglect. The girl started foster care at the age of four years and three months and had been with her foster carer for a year and four months.

A brief history

The case was studied on the basis of interviews with the girl, her main carers, parents, siblings, as well as the foster care staff. The approaches were based on active listening and on-site observation at different times. Initially, there was a moment of sensitization, in which the researcher brought the families together for an “icebreaker”. The interviewees then appeared separately for data collection.

According to the narrative presented, the child in care is the youngest child of a couple with three children, who are expecting their fourth. It should be noted that these are black people, as are the majority of those in the Brazilian protection system. The girl was tracheostomized and gastrostomized, as well as having a diagnosis of chronic non-progressive encephalopathy. The reason for the complication has not been confirmed, but there is a hypothesis of neonatal asphyxia.

At the age of two months, she was hospitalized for approximately four months. Her parents accompanied her to hospital to learn how to look after the child at home. After her return, she had to go back to hospital a few times due to respiratory problems, dehydration and malnutrition. At the end of the last hospitalization, by court order, she was sent to institutional care, where she remained for a few months.

Sometime later, she was hospitalized again with similar symptoms and stayed there for about a year, when she returned to the foster home. At the time, a nurse volunteered to look after her, as the institutional conditions were unfavorable for her to develop well. This was an exception in the foster care process, as families are usually trained before they meet the child.

In foster care, the girl was accompanied by a speech therapist and physiotherapist, due to her multiple disabilities. She was unfettered at the age of four and, at the time of the research, at the age of five, she was in the process of becoming literate and could formulate complete sentences. She was a quiet sleeper, was withdrawn when hugged and kissed and had a greater affinity with her father, her main caregiver during hospitalization. Her cognitive development was progressing, as was her social and emotional interaction, given that she had spent a long time alternating between foster care and hospital.

The first contact with her family of origin, after her referral to foster care, took place after a month. Subsequently, there was a period when the mother was prevented from visiting her daughter by court order. It is worth noting that the reason for the court decision did not come up in the interviews. According to the foster mother, the child had no reference to her biological mother as such.

Relationship between family of origin and foster family

The relationship between the family of origin and the foster family basically took place by telephone and weekly meetings in a location other than the homes of either family. The family of origin showed a willingness to broaden their contact with the foster child. However, the foster carer was clearly concerned about this, as the child was physically fragile and needed specialized care.

Affective and emotional characteristics

In general, the foster child's siblings showed affection and care for the little girl, who played animatedly with them. The data collected indicated feelings of cohesion between the siblings, the parents and the foster carer. The father recounted details of his daughter's hospitalization and revealed his constant concern to accompany the child, both in hospitals and in the institution where she was sheltered. The foster mother showed a desire to adopt the child, even calling herself a mother, although this was not an option from a legal standpoint. She made her commitment and care clear from the time she was in hospital, when she met the girl in the pediatric ward where she worked.

Basic care

After being removed from foster care, the parents showed little knowledge of and participation in the girl's daily routine. It was possible to observe that they had some difficulty with the physical care of their children who were not in care. However, the father, the sole financial provider, reported concern about organizing the children's daily routine.

With regard to basic family care, it was clear that the father was responsible for making decisions. According to the reports, he tried to reconcile work with the children's school schedules, as well as being responsible for deciding where to live and other issues, such as his wife's medical treatment, food, and travel, among others.

Protection against real risks

The data collected did not make it possible to assess the family of origin's protection against real risks, since the girl was in foster care and only met family members under supervision. The interviews showed that the foster carer was very concerned about the child's protection and daily care. At the time, her direct support network was restricted to a niece who was trained to look after the foster child in her absence. The foster carer showed concern for the girl's integrity, monitoring her activities intensively.

System of norms and values

The family of origin had more influence over the older children, since the youngest was in foster care and previously institutionalized most of the time. Regarding the foster carer, according to the interview and occasional observation, it was clear that there were rules and stipulated combinations regarding schedules, food, limits and the monitoring of these. When asked about the rigidity of the limits, she revealed that she was flexible, since she was a “mother”, allowing the other caregiver to act in a more imposing way.

Emotional security and identity development

It was not possible to assess the emotional security offered by the family of origin. However, the data collected and on-site observations revealed that the girl's main references in her family of origin were her father and sister. During the visit, and based on the father's and the foster carer's accounts, it was possible to recognize the affective bonds between the girl and her family of origin. However, it seemed that the foster mother and the caregiver (her niece) were her main references for emotional security at the time.

Education and leisure

Inclusion in school required support from the caregiver. In the context, the family of origin participated partially in the activities. As far as possible, the foster child met up with her siblings for recreational activities, but the foster carer was mainly responsible for providing opportunities for leisure and fun.

Family 2

Family 2 was made up of E7 (affective mother), E8 (foster carer) and e9 (foster child). The child had been removed from her family of origin due to rights violations. At the time, she had been in foster care for four months.

A brief history

The case study was based on interviews and on-site observation. The time taken to raise awareness among the interviewees was relatively comfortable, with everyone joining in. The previously scheduled meetings took place as expected.

According to the reports, the foster child, a boy, was 10 years old at the time of the data collection, having been handed over by his biological mother to his affective mother – friends at the time – at around one year old, with a few clothes and a meal. The biological mother never made contact again. With her paternity unclear, she was waiting for confirmation from a close male figure. Both participants interviewed from the family of origin were black.

When the child was handed over, the affectionate mother's family consisted of her, a partner, and two daughters aged 11 and 14. The girls' father became legally responsible for the child and the girls treated him like a brother. The youngest, in particular, was significantly responsible for looking after the boy, as both adults were away for many hours a day.

The foster child went to nursery school during early childhood and the youngest daughter, who was twelve at the time, was in charge of taking him there. He stayed in the afternoon, but it was not possible to identify who looked after him in the morning. At the age of four, he changed schools due to a change of address. Later, due to the new address, he moved to another full-time school.

At the time of the interviews, the affectionate mother said that the boy's main childhood vaccinations were missing and reported difficulties when he had to be hospitalized, since her former partner, who was the foster child's legal guardian, had left the family. From then on, the Guardianship Council was called in and his family began to be looked at more closely.

The affectionate mother reported a marked change in the boy's behavior around the age of ten. Although he had been a "very easy-going" child, he began to disobey and respond aggressively to people. According to her, his sisters began to distance themselves from him because of this change. The verbal aggression was accompanied by physical aggression towards some of his schoolmates, as well as defiant behavior in the community where he lived.

Relationship between family of origin and foster family

The relationship between the family of origin and the foster family took place over the phone and during weekly meetings. The boy had been in foster care for four months and the foster mother and her new partner had the main care responsibilities at the moment. It was possible to identify the foster carer's concern not to create expectations in the boy about reunification.

Affective and emotional characteristics

Both families showed affection for the boy, but the care they gave him varied greatly according to the reality in which he was living. The family of origin was close to drug trafficking, which caused the affectionate mother great concern. The possibility of setting adequate limits for the boy's safety seemed fragile, as she worked all day. There were signs of intra-family conflicts within the foster family, especially between the foster child and the foster mother's new partner; however, there were positive expressions of affection towards the boy. The family of origin reported a desire for reunification and the foster family reported a desire to continue taking the boy in for as long as necessary. However, this desire was questioned by the team.

Basic care

The reports provided show the fragility of the affective mother's involvement in daily care activities, a fact observed from an early age. The affective mother's concern to meet her child's basic needs existed, but it seemed to be hampered by factors related to emotional instability.

After his removal, when cared for by the foster carer, the boy seemed to be able to count on the more direct and continuous participation of an adult for the main activities of daily life. In addition, his circulation space was delimited, limiting his entry into places unsuitable for his age. The foster carer showed knowledge of the boy's habits and tried to meet his basic needs satisfactorily. Her emotional involvement also seemed favorable.

Protection from real risks

The data collected shows the affectionate mother's concern to protect the boy and her difficulty in dealing with his defiant behavior. In this way, his physical and emotional integrity seemed to be compromised in the home environment, since various risk factors were present and seemed important.

In the foster family, the concern and protection against real risks seemed adequate, and the boy's physical and emotional integrity was preserved. The family support network seemed satisfactory, but not directly involved. There were complaints of violence at school from other classmates and the foster carer made herself available to try to mediate the situation in that environment. Monitoring of daily activities seemed adequate.

System of norms and values

The establishment of limits by the affective mother seemed fragile. According to the interviews, there were rules, but they were poorly enforced. The difficulty of dealing with the boy's defiant behavior was repeatedly revealed and, as a consequence, stress in the relationship was evident.

The existence and adequacy of the rules stipulated in relation to timetables, routines and limits seemed to be well placed by the foster carer, despite the fact that it was difficult to comply with them in some respects. In this respect, rewards and sanctions were reported for non-compliance with agreements. There was a concern to transmit educational values, especially those relating to respect.

Emotional security

The boy's expressions of affection towards his mother seemed consistent and reciprocal. In addition to his concern for her physical integrity, he showed an interest in returning home, although he was aware that he could only do so with her treatment. Communication between the two seemed satisfactory, despite the fact that, at the time, foster care meant that contact was more distant.

The expression of affection between the foster carer and the person being fostered seemed reasonable given the short time they had been there. She, referred

to as mother, was asked for help in times of difficulty and confidential questions. He reported feeling trusted by the foster carer.

Identity development

The boy's sense of acceptance of the two reference persons (mother and foster carer), in terms of the construction of his identity, was not evaluated. However, the child reported difficulties in dealing with some male family figures.

The feelings of acceptability and belonging towards his affectionate mother seemed to be established. However, the hostility in the current school environment seemed to cause the boy discomfort. His degree of autonomy and independence seemed reasonable by the standards of his age group.

Education and leisure

The study conditions offered to the boy prior to entering foster care seemed fragile, as there was insufficient supervision and inconsistency in his school attendance. Participation in school activities, events and other social aspects were also affected by his defiant behavior. Regarding recreational activities, the leisure opportunities offered in his initial nucleus seemed restricted, and the child asked for new opportunities. When he was taken in, the boy was enrolled in school and attending regularly. However, he reported difficulties with his homework and asked for tutoring. Leisure time was offered more frequently, but he reaffirmed his desire for greater diversification.

Discussion

Through two case studies, this study sought to highlight the importance of analyzing various aspects of family reunification, using the SARP instrument as a support technique during the assessment. Whether due to the need for speed in resolving cases placed in foster care (Brasil, 1990), the lack of follow-up after reunification, or the need to listen to the children, among other factors, it seems unquestionable that the decision-making process regarding reunification requires consistent investigations. In the specific case of reintegration, longitudinal assessment and access to data on the trajectory after reunification seems to be

non-existent (CNJ, 2020; MDS, 2018). Another relevant aspect covered in this research was listening to the children. Even with obstacles relating to the fulfillment of their right to be heard or the need for instruments to assist in this context, they need to be prioritized in this regard (Hayes et al., 2024; Hutz et al., 2019; Melo & Sani, 2019).

There are three important aspects to consider in the first family: the multiple neglects suffered by the girl at both family and institutional level, the desire of the family of origin to get their child back, even though they did not seem to be able to, and the foster family's desire to adopt her. The scenario in question points to a situation that is difficult to resolve. According to Brazilian legislation and various children's scholars, foster care strives to maintain bonds and keep the measure short, as well as reuniting the child with a stable and safe family (Dias, 2021). However, in the case in question, given the multiple forms of neglect suffered by the girl, her return was postponed.

In Family 1, the foster child's parents should have been able to take care of her or have some alternative that could support them. However, mostly because of their condition of poverty, isolation and social exclusion, they failed to take care of her and were subjected to the judicialization of her life. In this case, the social condition may have facilitated the child's removal, as well as making it difficult for them to return. This family was marked by conditions of poverty and misery, even on an intergenerational level; they too had been neglected. The need for multiple supports to overcome these conditions was a demand that was never met (CONANDA, 2006).

With regard to the ability of the guardians to meet the children's main needs, it was clear that the foster family was in a better position in some respects, as it had more educational and economic resources. However, in terms of affective-emotional characteristics, the family of origin seemed to fulfill its role, even with its difficulties (Silva & Alberto, 2019). It is known that the caregiver needs to meet the child's demands beyond food or physical comfort for proper development (Dias, 2021; King et al., 2023; Papalia & Martorell, 2021). Dias (2021) corroborates this and refers to the notion of the "good enough mother", whose care is based on the physical and emotional support that is essential for healthy human maturation. Winnicott (2021) also stresses the importance of the continuity and stability of this care, so that the child develops a sense of trust and can become a subject. In this sense, we must recognize the survival value of the affection that exists between children and their caregivers.

In the case of the girl who was taken in, her bond with both families was evident. However, in order to decide on reunification, affection alone may not

be enough to support the decision, since she had multiple health demands that the family of origin did not seem to be able to meet at the time. It's worth pointing out that in this process, the intention is not to equalize the living conditions of the two families, but to empower the first family to receive the child back. However, in this case, the family of origin was cut off from inclusive public policies, highlighting a scenario of inequalities and the call for a decision that could prioritize the best interests of the child. Despite legislation supporting the non-separation of families due to poverty, this condition seemed to be an obstacle to reunification. Added to this was the fact that the foster mother had expressed her desire to adopt.

Observing the second family exposed a common reality in Brazil: children living in places where drug trafficking and its repression operate, leaving them very vulnerable. In addition, substance abuse was an important factor in the case. Another relevant aspect of the case was the physical and emotional instability of the family of origin, identified as an important risk factor in the boy's life trajectory.

In relation to Family 2, the study showed significant differences between the family of origin and the foster family in terms of protection against the real risks faced by the foster child. It became clear that there was a need to work to ensure better supervision of the child by the family of origin, protecting him from situations of violence and providing extra attention for basic and school care. These factors reaffirmed the vulnerable situation of many families in foster care, a fact also found in the previous case.

According to studies related to child abuse (Kimber et al., 2024; Rizvi et al., 2023; WHO, 2018) the unintentionality of the action does not prevent it from being unprotective or life-threatening. The lack of supervision of daily activities, for whatever reason, contributed to the judicial intervention and subsequent removal of the boy from his core group.

The Safety Methodology Reference Guide (Florida Office of Child Welfare, 2014) suggests that operators of the protection system ask themselves questions related to emotional security in parenting, think about protective actions with monitoring for the family, and identify and implement adaptations based on their needs. Also, according to Structured Decision Making (Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection, 2017), both safety and risk assessment need to be prioritized in cases. These bodies corroborate monitoring as necessary to observe the permanence or absence of strengths and weaknesses in the family of origin. In the same vein, the CQI Process (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019) suggests regular meetings, reassessment of investigations

and feedback on work, as well as discussing lessons learned in each case to advance public policies. However, it should be noted that there is a gap between what should be done and what can actually be done under concrete conditions in Brazil and in the municipality in question.

The school appears to be strategic for protection when it presents itself as a place to belong and strengthen emotional ties, and problematic when it exacerbates the crisis. Despite this, the need for networking is emphasized as fundamental in the process of family reunification, and this institution is a potential ally in combining efforts towards the emotional restructuring of the boy, whose multiple psychological demands tormented him.

The patterns of vulnerability found in both families of origin were very evident. Considered risk factors, they counteract the value of their affection for their children, i.e., the desire to have their children back in their original environment may not be enough to bring about reunification. Finally, it should be noted that the SARP tool provided an ecological view of each situation, seeing the sensitive points of the cases and gathering important data to be considered when making judicial decisions, especially from the point of view of the children in foster care.

Final considerations

Family reunification has been a challenge in the context of foster care. The decisions made by judges regarding the return of children are generally based on the opinions of the experts involved. These rulings can directly affect children's destinies, both in terms of their development and new forms of emotional attachment to their families. To the extent that social operators are equipped to assess specific demands, they can help to provide a better basis for decisions.

Based on this demand, some variables linked to children's needs were studied in a specific context. It was necessary to assess whether the caregivers and their social environment were able to fill these previously identified gaps. In this sense, by using the SARP instrument, the three areas analyzed (physical/biological, cognitive and emotional/social) were able to provide support for a more consistent assessment, with an understanding of the parental and family relationship. It should be noted that reunification depends on the assessment of personal, social and environmental factors and, above all, on the achievement of protective practices in which the best interests of the child can be prioritized.

Another important aspect identified in this study was the possibility provided by the instrument to listen to and contribute to children and their families. Their participation and involvement in decisions relating to their lives is fundamental. Through attentive listening, possible partners could be identified, who could then be trained to guide the children's return. We also looked at personal skills, crisis coping strategies and, above all, worked with a focus on real families, identifying their limitations and potential.

The solution of finding a simple and quick way of reunification seems distant and unrealistic. It is important to look at these cases individually, properly monitored, with enough time for a detailed and collaborative assessment. In this sense, the main contributions of this article are related to the possibility of improving the dynamics of case assessment, making it more practical, effective and oriented towards scientifically-backed decision-making.

The study had limitations due to the small number of families within the research profile and the impossibility of collecting data on some specific dimensions. It therefore points to the need for continuity in this line of research, in order to expand and disseminate new methodologies for working with foster families.

References

- Annie E. Casey Foundation (2019). *Better decisions for better results: How two counties are improving the quality and consistency of child protection investigations*. Annie E. Casey Foundation. <https://aecf.org/resources/better-decisions-for-better-results> (acesso 02/08/2024)
- Baptista, R. F. (2018). *Infâncias em famílias acolhedoras: Perspectivas e desafios da reintegração familiar* (tese de doutorado). Departamento de Psicologia, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro (PUC-Rio). <https://doi.org/10.17771/PUCRio.acad.35712>
- Baptista, R.; Zamora, M. H.; Santos, E. (2019). Foster care and reintegration: Different Portuguese similarities. *International Journal of Advanced Engineering Research and Science*, 6(8), 38-44. <https://journal-repository.com/index.php/ijaers/article/view/180>
- Brasil (1990). Lei 8.069, de 13/07/1990 – *Dispõe sobre o Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente e dá outras providências*. https://planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/leis/L8069.htm
- Chartier, S.; Blavier, A. (2021). Should the reintegration of children in foster care into their biological families be the only goal of the legislation governing foster care? Factors influencing the relations between parents and their children living in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 121, 105741. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105741>

- CNJ – Conselho Nacional de Justiça (2020). *Diagnóstico sobre o Sistema Nacional de Adoção e Acolhimento 2020*. <https://bibliotecadigital.cnj.jus.br/xmlui/handle/123456789/89>
- CONANDA – Conselho Nacional dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente (2006). *Resolução 113, de 19/04/2006*. <https://gov.br/mdh/pt-br/acao-a-informacao/participacao-social/conselho-nacional-dos-direitos-da-crianca-e-do-adolescente-conanda/resolucoes/resolucao-no-113-de-19-04-06-parametros-do-sgd.pdf>
- Delgado, P.; Baptista, R. (2020). A mediação socioeducativa no acolhimento familiar na perspectiva da educação social. *Laplage em Revista*, 6(3), 64-74. https://researchgate.net/publication/343440493_A_mediacao_socioeducativa_no_acolhimento_familiar_na_perspetiva_da_educacao_social
- Dias, E. O. (2021). *A teoria do amadurecimento de D. W. Winnicott* (4ª ed.). DWWeditorial.
- Esposito, T.; Caldwell, J.; Chabot, M.; Delaye, A.; Trocmé, N.; Hélie, S.; Fallon, B. (2022). Reunification trajectories in Quebec: Acknowledging chronic family challenges to support stability. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 130, 105437. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2021.105437>
- Everest Media (2022). *Summary of Jane Nelsen & Lynn Lott's Positive Discipline for Teenagers* (revised 3rd ed.). Everest Media.
- Florida Office of Child Welfare (2014). *Safety Methodology Reference Guide*. <https://www.myflfamilies.com/sites/default/files/2023-06/ReferenceGuide.pdf> (acesso 06/08/2024)
- Hayes, C.; Bhaskara, A.; Tongs, C.; Bisht, A.; Buus, N. (2024). What purpose do voices serve if no one is listening? A systematic review of children and young people's perspectives on living in the foster care system. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 53(3), 525-562. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-023-09779-0>
- Hutz, C. S.; Bandeira, D. R.; Trentini, C. M.; Rovinski, S. L. R.; Lago, V. M. (2019). *Avaliação psicológica no contexto forense*. Artmed.
- Jones, D.; Jonson-Reid, M. (2023). Child protective services reports after reunification: An examination of the risk of being rereported to child protective services after returning home from foster care. *Child Maltreatment* (Epub ahead of print). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595231208705>
- Kimber, M.; Baker-Sullivan, E.; Stewart, D. E.; Vanstone, M. (2024). Improving health professional recognition and response to child maltreatment and intimate partner violence: Protocol for two mixed methods pilot randomized controlled trials. *JMIR Research Protocols*, 13, e50864. <https://doi.org/10.2196/50864>
- King, L. S.; Guyon-Harris, K. L.; Valadez, E. A.; Radulescu, A.; Fox, N. A.; Nelson, C. A.; Zeanah, C. H.; Humphreys, K. L. (2023). A comprehensive multilevel analysis of the Bucharest Early Intervention Project: Causal effects on recovery from early severe deprivation. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 180(8), 573-583. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.20220672>

- Koller, S. H.; Paludo, S. S.; Morais, N. A. (2019). *Ecological engagement: Urie Bronfenbrenner's method to study human development*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27905-9>
- LaBrenz, C. A.; Fong, R.; Cubbin, C. (2020). The road to reunification: Family- and state system-factors associated with successful reunification for children ages zero-to-five. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 99, 104252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104252>
- LaBrenz, C. A.; Jenkins, L.; Huang, H.; Ryan, S. D.; Panisch, L. S.; Kim, Y.; Baiden, P. (2023). State-level policies and reunification: A multi-level survival analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 146, 106502. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106502>
- Lago, V. M. (2012). *Construção de um sistema de avaliação do relacionamento parental para situações de disputa de guarda* (tese de doutorado). Instituto de Psicologia, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). <https://hdl.handle.net/10183/56830>
- Lago, V. M.; Bandeira, D. R. (2015). *Sistema de Avaliação do Relacionamento Parental – SARP*. Casa do Psicólogo.
- Lindner, A. R.; Hanlon, R. (2024). Outcomes of youth with foster care experiences based on permanency outcome – Adoption, aging out, long-term foster care, and reunification: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 156, 107366. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107366>
- Los Angeles County Office of Child Protection (2017). *Examination of using structured decision making and predictive analytics in assessing safety and risk in child welfare*. https://cwlibrary.childwelfare.gov/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma991000836459707651&vid=01CWIG_INST:01CWIG
- Maltais, C.; Cyr, C.; Parent, G.; Pascuzzo, K. (2019). Identifying effective interventions for promoting parent engagement and family reunification for children in out-of-home care: A series of meta-analyses. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 88, 362-375. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.12.009>
- MDS – Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome (2009). *Orientações técnicas: Serviços de acolhimento para crianças e adolescentes*. https://mds.gov.br/webarquivos/publicacao/assistencia_social/Cadernos/orientacoes-tecnicas-servicos-de-acolhimento.pdf
- MDS – Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social (2018). *Censo SUAS 2017*. [https://aplicacoes.mds.gov.br/sagirmsp/ferramentas/docs/Censo%20SUAS%202017%20\(1\).pdf](https://aplicacoes.mds.gov.br/sagirmsp/ferramentas/docs/Censo%20SUAS%202017%20(1).pdf)
- Melo, M. F.; Sani, A. I. (2019). A participação da criança na justiça: Mito ou realidade?. *Sociedade e Infancias*, 3, 133-151. <https://doi.org/10.5209/soci.63787>
- Papalia, D. E.; Martorell, G. (2021). *Desenvolvimento humano* (14ª ed.). McGraw Hill Brasil.
- Pinheiro, A.; Andrade, C. Y.; Braga, H.; Valente, J.; Navarro, N. (Orgs.) (2024). *Acolhimento familiar: Contribuições do IV Simpósio Internacional de Acolhimento Familiar*, parte 1. Caderno de Pesquisa NEPP, 94. Unicamp. <https://www.nepp.unicamp.br/biblioteca/periodicos/issue/view/194/CadPesqNepp94>

- Poremba, R. (2021). *Foster care system & experience: The processes, professionals involved & experiences that can occur: Learning through the experiences of a social worker*. Independently published.
- Rizvi, M. B.; Connors, G. P.; Rabiner, J. (2023). *New York State child abuse, maltreatment, and neglect*. StatPearls. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK565843>
- Sacur, B. M.; Diogo, E. (2021). The EU strategy on the rights of the child and the European child guarantee: Evidence-based recommendations for alternative care. *Children*, 8(12), 1181. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children8121181>
- Salvagni, J. M.; Pedroza, R. L. S. (2021). Acolhimento familiar, articulação de rede e reintegração familiar: Reflexões a partir da prática. *Revista Desenvolvimento Social (RDS)*, 27(2), 170-196. <https://doi.org/10.46551/issn2179-6807v27n2p170-196>
- Silva, A. C. S.; Alberto, M. F. P. (2019). Fios soltos da rede de proteção dos direitos das crianças e adolescentes. *Psicologia: Ciência e Profissão*, 39, e185358. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-3703003185358>
- Vallejo-Slocker, L.; Idoiaga-Mondragon, N.; Axpe, I.; Willi, R.; Guerra-Rodríguez, M.; Montserrat, C.; del Valle, J. F. (2024). Systematic review of the evaluation of foster care programs. *Psychosocial Intervention*, 33(1), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.5093/pi2023a14>
- Vanderfaellie, J.; Borms, D.; Teunissen, M. S. L.; Gypen, L.; Van Holen, F. (2023). Reasons used by Flemish foster care workers in family reunification decision making. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 144, 106741. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106741>
- WHO – World Health Organization (2018). *INSPIRE Handbook: Action for implementing the seven strategies for ending violence against children*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/inspire-handbook-action-for-implementing-the-seven-strategies-for-ending-violence-against-children>
- Winnicott, D. (2021). *Da pediatria à psicanálise: Escritos reunidos*. Ubu.

Recebido em 19 de setembro de 2023

Aceito para publicação em 22 de abril de 2024