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Map4FosterCare

# MAP4Fostercare

## NATIONAL REPORT

**SIRIUS\***

**Partner Organisation**

Croatia



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Map4FosterCare



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# 1. Introduction

The MAP4Fcare project is an EU-funded initiative aimed at improving the foster care system by addressing the needs and experiences of foster parents, children, and other stakeholders involved in the process. The project seeks to enhance support and training provided to foster parents, ensuring better outcomes for foster children across different cultural and institutional contexts within the EU.

The main objectives of the MAP4Fcare project are:

1. To review and assess the current state of foster care systems in participating countries.
2. To identify the needs and challenges faced by foster parents, children, and professionals involved in foster care.
3. To develop and implement improved training programs and support mechanisms for foster parents.
4. To foster collaboration and knowledge exchange among EU countries to enhance the overall quality of foster care services.

Work Package 2 (WP2) is a critical component of the MAP4Fcare project, focusing on the enhancement of adult education through the development of inclusive educational content for foster parents. WP2 aims to align with the overarching objectives of the project, which include creating upskilling pathways and improving accessibility to adult education. This work package seeks to provide qualitative data on foster care practices, contributing to guidelines and training for foster care parents and professionals. Additionally, it aims to enhance current training programs and promote experience exchange among parents.

The key aims of WP2, as outlined in the project indicators, are:

1. To demonstrate qualitative data on the parental aspect of foster care practices
2. To develop and evaluate educational content for foster parents
3. To contribute to adult education
4. To support current training programs.

The insights gained from WP2 will inform the development of tailored training programs and support mechanisms for foster parents, ultimately contributing to the overall objectives of the MAP4Fcare project. By ensuring that the data collection instruments are robust, culturally sensitive, and relevant, WP2 lays the foundation for meaningful and actionable findings that can improve foster care practices across the EU.



## 2. Foster Care Practices in Croatia

### 2.1. Overview of Foster Care System

In Croatia, foster care is a non-institutional form of accommodation, provided by foster family, for children and adults.

The user of this type of accommodation can be a child, a younger adult until the end of regular schooling, or no longer than one year after finishing regular schooling if they cannot be employed, and no later than 26 years of age, or an adult, who has been recognized as having the right to social housing services.

With the aim of protecting the personal rights and well-being of the child, the court imposes measures that include the temporary entrustment of care to a foster parent. It is its temporary nature that distinguishes it from the institution of adoption, although majority of children that are in foster care stay there until they reach adulthood.

The process of fostering a child in Croatia is regulated by the following laws and by-laws:

1. The Family Law (Official Gazette 103/15, 98/19, 47/20)
2. The Law on Foster Care (Official Gazette 115/18, 18/22)
3. The Ordinance on the Method and Duration of Training and Additional Training of Foster Parents (Official Gazette 63/19)
5. Ordinance on the method and procedure of family assessment for foster care (Official Gazette 46/2019)
6. Ordinance on housing, social and other conditions for foster care (OG 46/2019). records of foster families, the register of foster families and placed beneficiaries, and the content of the report form of foster parents (Official Gazette 63/2019)
7. Ordinance on the composition and working methods of the Commission for the selection of foster parents for performing foster care as a profession (Official Gazette 46/19)
8. The Ordinance on Awarding Foster Parents (Official Gazette 46/19)
9. Ordinance on the content and method of keeping records of foster families, the register of foster families and placed beneficiaries, and the content of the report form of foster parents (Official Gazette 63/2019)
10. By the Decision on the amount of compensation for the work of foster parents (Official Gazette 27/2022)
11. By the Decision on the amount of maintenance fees for the needs of beneficiaries (Official Gazette 27/2022)
12. Law on Protection from Domestic Violence (Official Gazette 70/17 and 126/19).

Croatian Institute for Social Work has formed the foster care teams in each county in Croatia and they are responsible for the assessment of needs and the development of the network of foster carers in the public social service network, the selection and preparation of foster carers, monitoring the provision of services and training of foster carers, and provides



professional assistance, support and supervision to foster carers in the county. Teams for foster care cooperate with mobile teams of professional workers of social care homes and other licensed social service providers and ensures their participation in the implementation of education for foster care.

## 2.2. Types of Foster Care

Types of foster care in Croatia:

- a) traditional foster care
- b) kinship foster care
- c) foster care as a profession.

Foster care as profession can be:

- a) standard foster care
- b) specialized foster care

### **Traditional foster care**

A person (or a family) who meets all the requirements for foster care and has their own sources of income can engage in traditional foster care. The traditional foster parent also has the right for compensation of the child's living expenses (maintenance allowance), but also the right to compensation for the work of the foster parent. A maximum of three children can be placed in a traditional foster family, and two in the case of a single foster parent (there are certain exceptions, such as when it comes to the placement of siblings, parents with a child up to the age of one, or placement in a crisis situation).

### **Kinship foster care**

Kinship foster care can be provided by a member of the child's primary family, if it is in the child's best interest. These can be grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts, uncles, older brothers or sisters, etc. Kinship foster parents have the right to compensation for the child's living expenses, but not the right to compensation for the work of the foster parent.

### **Foster care as a profession**

This kind of foster care can be provided by a person who is not employed and does not perform an independent registered activity of a trade or free profession or other independent activity and who meets special conditions related to work experience and level of education.

Standard foster care as profession provides accommodation services to the same type of users (either children or adults), while specialized foster care as profession provides accommodation and specific care to children with behavioural problems, children and young adults with severe disabilities or those children or young adults who are seriously ill.

Foster parents who engage in foster care as a profession are entitled to all the benefits already mentioned, but also rights from the pension and health systems and rights during unemployment. In a foster family engaged in foster care as a profession, three beneficiaries must be accommodated at the same time (there are exceptions when it comes to children



under the age of three, children with more severe difficulties or placement of parents with a child up to the age of one).

## 2.3. Foster Parent Recruitment

Eligibly criteria for becoming a foster parent:

- be of legal age and has work capacity
- be a Croatian citizen (with the exception of: a citizen of a member state of the European Economic Area and the Swiss Confederation who has a permanent residence in the Republic of Croatia, or a citizen of third countries who lives and has a permanent residence in the Republic of Croatia (with the fulfilment of additional conditions)
- be a domiciled and lives in the Republic of Croatia
- be younger than 60 years old, unless he continues to perform foster care or if he performs foster care as a relative
- has completed at least high school education, unless he/she performs foster care as a relative
- has completed the training to become a foster parent, unless he is performing foster care as a relative
- there are no obstacles to performing foster care (disturbed family relations, illness or condition that endangers the health or interests of the user, socially unacceptable behaviour)
- has prescribed housing conditions
- has the written consent of all adult members of the joint household to perform foster care, unless he performs foster care as a single person.

In order to perform foster care, it is necessary to first obtain a permit to perform foster care. To obtain a permit to be a foster care, it is necessary to submit an application for foster care and other required documentation to the regional office of the Croatian Institute for Social Work. This is followed by an interview with a social worker and a psychologist, psychological testing and the arrival of the foster care team or expert workers of the Croatian Institute for Social Work in a living space of potential foster care family.

After it is established that the applicant for foster care meets all the prescribed conditions, the Croatian Institute for Social Work draws up a conclusion on the fulfilment of the conditions, and the applicant and his spouse or extramarital partner, and according to the expert's assessment, other family members are referred for training for a foster parent. Basic training/education last 40 hours and consists of lectures, workshops and examples from practice. Foster parents who take care of children with mental and physical impairments and behavioural disorders have additional education that last 6 to 12 hours.

The annual education is carried out based on the assessment of the needs of the foster parents by the foster care team or an expert worker in the regional office of the Croatian Institute for



Social Work. The annual education for kinship foster parents is conducted for at least 4 hours per year, and for traditional foster parents and foster parents who practice fostering as a profession, for at least 8 hours per year.

Teams for foster care should organized supervisions for foster parents in the cooperation with the social care centre or the community service centre.

Besides that, many foster parents' organisations (NGO/CSO) organize educations according to the needs of their members and in cooperation with different institutions and non-profit organizations.

During a period of fostering, foster parents should have, according to law, support from teams for foster care and from professionals from community service centres or social care centres.





## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Procedure

The methodology for this work package includes a combination of online questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and group discussion interviews. The following outlines the process for each data collection method:

#### **Online Questionnaires**

As the leader of the WP2 PUHU prepared a collection of questions in English for the primary phase. These questionnaires were reviewed, revised, and adjusted by partners to ensure they were relevant to the target groups, including professionals, volunteers, and foster parents. Partners translated the questionnaires and consent forms into their national languages. They also discussed and implemented necessary cultural and institutional adaptations. After finalizing the questionnaires, partners engaged their associated partners, relevant professionals, and foster parents to collect responses. A pilot test was conducted to ensure the effectiveness of the questionnaires, with a minimum of 15 responses collected for initial testing.

#### **In-depth Interviews**

Each partner conducted in-depth interviews with 5 participants, either online or in-person, to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Pilot testing was recommended to evaluate the questionnaires and refine the interview procedure. Interviews were conducted following a structured format to ensure consistency. The focus was on gathering detailed insights into the foster care process from the participants' perspectives.

**In-depth interview questions are attached to this document**

#### **Group Discussion Interviews**

Partners conducted group discussion interviews with a minimum of 3 participants. Ideally, these participants included the same individuals who participated in the in-depth interviews to maintain consistency and depth of understanding.

As the WP leader PUHU provided a guideline to ensure the quality and ethical approach essential for ethnographic interviews. These group discussions were audio-recorded to document the process and ensure no significant information was lost. The recordings helped in capturing the nuances of the discussions for a thorough analysis.

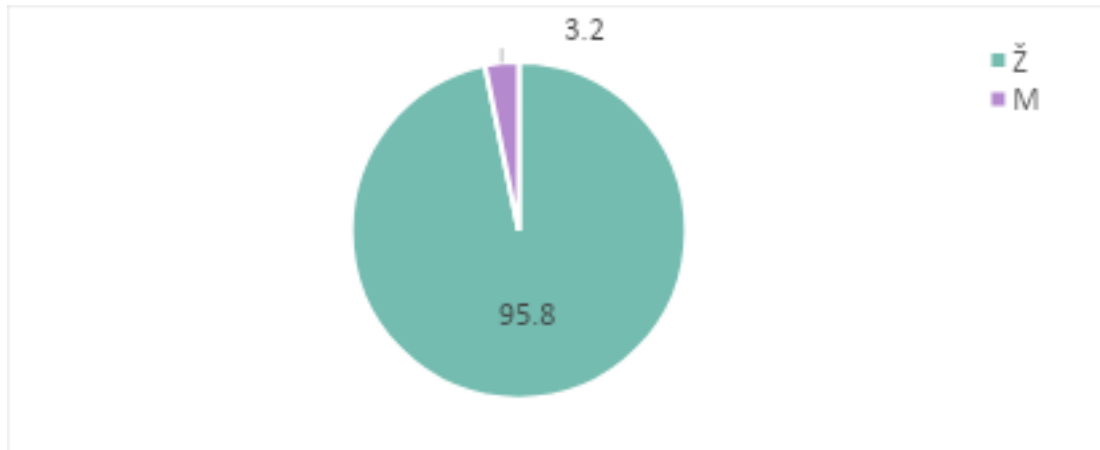


Group discussion questions are attached to this document

## 3.2 Participant Demographics

### “Online Questionnaires”

- Gender



- Age

30-40	41-50	51-60	61 +
2	7	9	7

- Education

Unskilled labour force	Primary education	Secondary education	University
1	4	18	2

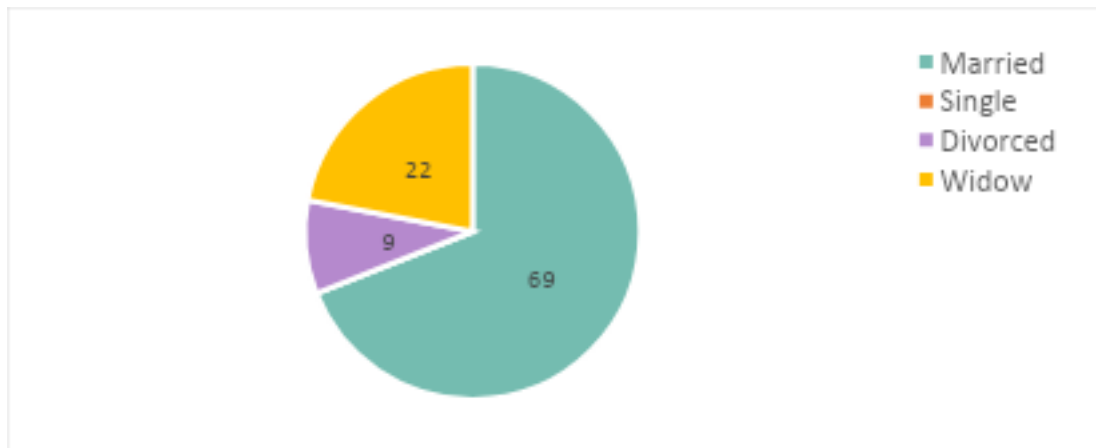
- Job

Housewife	4
Office technician	1



B.Sc. Economist	1
Economist	2
Cook	1
Commercialist	2
Clothing manufacturer	2
Butcher	1
Trader/seller	5
Classroom teaching assistant	1
Tourist worker	1
Pensioner	1
Veterinary technician	1
Religious teacher	1
Health and sanitary laboratory technician	1

- Marital Status



- Number of Children (foster care or biological)

Foster children on care:

1	2	3	4	5	6
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2 family	6 families	6 families	7 families	2 family	2 family
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### Biological Children

0	1	2	3	4
2	3	11	6	3
One family has 2 biological and 2 adopted children				

Interesting information is a number of children that foster parents have fostered so far:

Number of foster families	Number of children
9	1-9
3	10-19
7	20-29
6	30 <

One family fostered 90 children, one 83 and one 50, but this includes crises placement and weekend placement.

- Children's Age and Gender

Age	Foster children		Biological children	
	F	M	F	M
0-3	11	5	1	
4-6	7	7		
7-11	5	12		1
12-14	6	9		
15-18	12	7		1
19-26		1	6	7
27-35			6	7
36 +			6	3



- Household Composition

Spouse	10
Spouse and biological children	4
Parents	2
Biological children	1
Noone	8

- Type of Foster Parent

Traditional foster care	17
Kinship foster care	0
Foster care as a profession	8 (no one as specialized foster care)

- Years as a Foster Parent

Years	Number of foster parents
1	1
4	2
6	1
9	1
10	4
11	1
12	1
14	2
15	1
16	2
17	1



18	2
20	1
22	1
24	1
26	1
30	1
40	1

□ 10 years	9
11-20 years	11
21-40 years	5

- Others Responsible for Child's Care

Those that live with other members of the family have their support when needed and those living alone do not have support from the others. One foster mother occasionally, when she has to leave children alone, pay to one woman to look after them.

### Online interview participants

Five foster mothers that have participated in the interviews are age 52 to 60 and are engaged in foster care for 10 to 25 years. Two are married, two separated and one widow. Three have a permit for standard foster care and two for traditional foster care.

### Focus group participants

Four foster mothers participated in the online focus group. Three of them also participated in the individual interviews while two were prevented to participate in the focus group. One foster mother that didn't participate in the interview joined this focus group and is also experienced foster parent (foster mother for more than 15 years).



## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Application Process

#### 4.1.1. Challenges:

Majority say that process was **quite simple and went without any problems or delays**. **They have also described that it** includes contacting regional office of the Institute for Social Work, tests, interviews and education, as well as check-ups. Altogether it lasted 5 to 6 months.

Some examples of the answers:

“Everything went relatively quickly and without problems.”

“The application and the process of obtaining the permit went well because we had good and professional support.”

“I submitted the application to my social welfare office. We went through education, various checks, collected all the necessary papers. Everything went smoothly and within a few months I got my license.”

Those that got permit a long time ago claim that before it was much simpler to become foster parent. There was no obligatory education, just check-ups of living conditions and interview and in a few days, they would get child on care. But from the answers of foster parents that were getting licence in recent years it seems that they do not experience this improved process as long and unneeded.

Motivation for becoming foster parents:

- Mostly the will to help a child without adequate family care and a love for children and empathy
- Tradition of foster care in their families
- Loneliness and a sense of uselessness along with a will to help some child

#### 4.1.2 Support Needs:

Most states that they needed support from professionals in social welfare centres (now regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work) and from the family members. Few answered that they appreciated very much support and advises from other, experienced foster parents.



## 4.2 Adjustment Process

### 4.2.1 Experiences during the adjustment process with the child

Every child is specific and adjustment depends on age, experience that child had and relationship with his/her biological family.

Usually, if children are very young, process of adjustment is going smoothly and without significant problems.

It is not only the child that has to adjust but foster parents and other member of the family, also.

Process of adjustment can last from 3 months up to 2 years (“I thought that I had to like child immediately and that it should be love at first sight, but it is a long process and it is not easy. After two years of placement, a child is now 2.5 years old, everything fell into place”). It is much harder with Roma children because of the language – “we do not understand each other”.

Sometimes it helps if there are other foster children already in the family and they explain to newcomer rules and the way family life is organized.

If biological parents have negative attitude toward foster parents, a process of adjustment is usually hard.

Also, a process of adjustment is harder if foster parents do not get any information about child before placement - family history, health conditions, experienced trauma etc.

Very important is that foster parents show, in this process of adjustment, understanding and patience and to talk a lot with child and create atmosphere of confidentiality.

**All foster mothers that participated in the interview** stated that they didn't have adequate support at the beginning. Some were among first foster parents in their county and even social welfare professional didn't have knowledge how to help them. Things started to change when Community service centre (ex-Home for children without adequate parental care) organized groups and individual support for foster parents. In the meanwhile, foster parents were trying to help themselves by reading professional books.

Although, in the last 10-15 years situation has change for better and in many places foster parents have support, it could happen that they cannot rely on the help of the social welfare system. It depends very much on the professionals working in regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work, their knowledge and readiness to help foster parents.





In the case of placement of Roma children, a very big problem is language. With an exception of few Roma families that are fostering children, the rest of foster families do not understand or speak Roma language and the process of adaptation is very difficult. We do not have Roma assistant in foster families and we should have them.

#### 4.2.2 Support Issues:

Problems that are mentioned here can be divided in few categories:

- Lack of information about health condition that child has and consequently action that foster parents should take
- Relationship with biological parents of foster children cause many problems (time of their visits, giving permissions for different activities or medical intervention that child needs, influence on the attitude of the child toward foster parents...)
- Children with behavioural problems – lack of knowledge, skills and professional support for approaching those problems on right way.

Some foster parents state that they have received help from social welfare professionals but one answer pointed out the poor support from regional office of the Croatian Institute for Social Work (support depend very much on professionals working in certain office).

During the process of adjustment foster parents were attending different trainings, but mostly obligatory educations or educations that different NGOs have organized. There is no specific training for the period of adjustment in foster family. One foster mother stated that the most helpful were meetings of foster families where they shared their experience. One foster mother did not attend any education during this period, since these training started some 20 years ago and some fosters that participated in this questioner are fostering for 40 years

### 4.3 Training and Support Process

23 foster parents answered that they are participating in annual obligatory trainings that social welfare centres are organizing. 2 foster parents stated that regional office of the Croatian Institute for Social Work didn't organize any training in the last 2 years.

Beside obligatory education majority participated in additional trainings organized by foster parents NGOs or other NGOs, family centres or community service centres and some mentioned supervision groups.

Although majority stated that each education was somehow useful, even if topics were repeated, two answered that educations didn't help them and that life is different from what is written on paper. Supervision is seen as highly useful.



### **Interviews participants**

Education/training, as well as the process of obtaining permit (licence) for fostering is much better (better quality) than 20 years ago. Training for getting permit used to be much shorter some 20 years ago. Now it is much more detailed and covers all the important areas of foster care. Although this training should be the same in the whole Croatia, it still depends very much on the local or regional office e.g. on the professional working with foster parents. Obligatory annual trainings should last 8 hours and be organized by regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work. Satisfaction with this training depends very much on the regional office that organizing them. Good practise in some regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work is that they ask foster parents what kind of education they need. Some regional offices decide the topic by themselves in order to fulfil the obligation they have and foster parents do not benefit of education organized in this way.

In the last 15 years foster parents started to organize themselves in NGOs. Those NGOs also organize educations and choose which one they want.

Educations/training should not be too often and last too long since many foster parents do not have time to attend them. Also, some experienced foster parents could give training to others and sometimes they do that for school staff or kindergarten staff about the problems and needs of foster children.

They all agree that support groups and supervision groups are very much needed and that they are helping them more than educations/trainings.

Besides the needs for support groups or supervision groups almost all underline that the topic of relationship with biological parents of children is very needed and that some hesitate to become foster parents because of the fear of contact with biological parents of foster children. In this, very helpful could be experienced foster parents and their support to new foster parents (mentoring).

### **Focus group participants**

Mostly they are satisfied with educations that are available to them. Mandatory, introductory education is good and detailed but you cannot remember all that and just when child comes to family you realize what information, skills and knowledge you need. Regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work usually organize obligatory annual educations in coordination with foster parents so that topics are of interest for them. Foster parents' NGOs also organize educations according to the needs of foster parents. Quality of these educations vary, especially if organized by regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work since not all are dedicated to foster care.

All participants of this focus group are satisfied with supervisions and think that supervisions are even more important than educations. Supervisions also, in a way, protect foster parents, in a situation if they are accused of abuse or neglect, since supervisor knows them and can advocate for them. In some places supervisions are organized by foster parents' NGO in other by Community Service Centre.



Problem is that supervisions and support groups are not available to all. Discussion in this focus group pointed to a different understanding of the role of support groups. Some foster parents from this group state that foster parents expect to get answers to some procedural questions or administrative problems on support groups led by professionals from Community Service Centre. The others disagreed and state that support groups are not the right place for that. They say that support groups are forming so foster parents can exchange their experience and support each other.

They think that professionals form social welfare system, as well as school staff need education, too – getting to know more about the problems, needs and legal regulations related to children in foster care and foster families.

They have also mentioned that mentoring is happening spontaneously. New foster parents ask advice and help from more experienced foster parents. They would like this to be recognized and regulated on some way. They do not expect to be paid for this but to get some kind of recognition and that everyone knows who are the mentors.

### **Training Details:**

Basic, obligatory training/education last 40 hours and consists of lectures, workshops, examples from practice, videos and sometimes hosting of experienced foster parents. This training is the same for all foster parents and educational materials are unique for all professionals in social care that work with foster parents, since 2019.

Topic included in obligatory training:

1. Getting to know legal obligations and relation with social welfare institutions
2. Children's rights, including the rights of children with disabilities
3. Specific questions related to the child's developmental stages
4. Development of attachment
5. Cooperation and communication with the child's biological family
6. Preparing the child and members of the foster family for changes - the arrival or departure of a foster child from the family
7. Effective educational methods
8. The importance of encouraging education
9. Recognizing and dealing with the trauma and consequences of child abuse
10. How foster parents experience stress and how they deal with stress
11. Intercultural foster care
13. Children with developmental disabilities
14. Children with behavioural problems

Foster parents who take care of children with mental and physical impairments and behavioural disorders have additional education that last 6 to 12 hours.

Topic included in additional education for children with behavioural problems:



1. Behavioural problems
2. Understanding behavioural problems
3. How to approach children with behavioural problems
4. How to deal with a child's difficult behaviour

There are also materials for education of foster parents that would foster unaccompanied children and topic of this education are:

1. Who are unaccompanied children?
2. Specifics of victims of human trafficking
3. International and national legislative framework and special guardianship
4. Raising children in a different ethnic environment and planning leaving care

The annual education is carried out based on the assessment of the needs of the foster parents by the foster care team or an expert worker in the regional office of the Croatian Institute for Social Work. The annual education for kinship foster parents is conducted for at least 4 hours per year, and for traditional foster parents and foster parents who practice fostering as a profession, for at least 8 hours per year.

Topics of the trainings/educations organized by foster parents' association or other NGOs that provide education for foster parents vary according to the interest and the needs of foster parents: contact with biological parents, children with behavioural problems, mindfulness, learning problems, childhood trauma, sexuality, internet security, emotions, writing project proposals....

All these educations are helping foster parents in providing adequate and good care for foster children. Since 2010. some foster parents participated in the education for running NGOs, applying and managing projects related to foster children and foster parents and we have many very active foster parents NGOs that are also part of Forum for quality foster care for children (national NGO that gather foster parents' NGO from whole Croatia).

Many answers in this questioner emphasise the importance of supervision for foster parents.

### **Community Experiences**

Sharing the experience among foster parents depend on the place of living and existing services and network. Majority are meeting once or twice a month in the foster parents' NGO or community service centre or Institute for Social Work (supervisions, trainings, gatherings). From 25 foster parents that have fulfilled this questioner, 15 are members of different foster parents NGOs.

Some are meeting just occasional when regional office of Croatian Institute for Social Work organizes some gathering or annual education.

Mostly they are in private and frequent contact with other foster parents.

They also meet each other on annual gathering of foster families that is organized by Forum for Quality Foster Care and on some congresses.



### **Interviews participants**

Only one interviewed foster mother is not a member of any foster parents' NGO. The others are very active in their local foster parents' NGO as well as national NGO that gather local foster parents' NGOs.

Local NGOs organize gathering of foster parents, usually once or twice a month. They also organize trainings according to foster parents' needs and some organize supervision groups.

Many foster parents are in non-formal everyday contact.

Foster parents that participated in the interview all have more than 10 years of experience, participate in the education of new foster parents or are active in foster parents' NGOs, and are willing to share their experience with new foster parents. Many new foster parents, at the beginning of their foster care engagement, ask them for advice.



## 5. Additional Insights

Mostly participants are satisfied with the educations/trainings but some suggestions for improvement were given:

- to ask foster parents what training do they need
- to have more topics that are in line with new trends – digitalisation (some foster parents are computer illiterate), social media, internet security
- to educate and inform professionals and policy makers about needs in foster families

Significant part of the interviews and focus group were about motivation to become foster parent, status issues of foster parents and perception of the foster parents in the general public.

Motivation for becoming foster parent (interviewed foster mothers):

- love for children (when biological children become independent)
- religious reasons – to thank God for all blessings and give back
- hearing about child that needed family care,
- living near Home for children without adequate parental care, attended school that those children also went to and knew families that were taking those children on Sunday lunches or holidays
- a friend that was foster parent and knew some foster parents

Question about motivation brought lively discussion in focus group about position of foster care parents in society. While some think that conditions for fostering are better than before, the others disagree and state that they are better for foster children but not foster parents. Further discussion led to conclusion that regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work don't have the same practise. Some have neglected foster care, but according to new organization of social welfare, all regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work have to establish foster care team and hopefully this will bring more uniform and improved work in the field of foster care. The main problems are connected with the consent that biological parents should give to foster child (for medical treatment, for participating in extra curriculum activities, for going to school excursion etc.). Although in some regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work getting these consents is organized much better and foster parents do not have problems with that. The other big problem is relationship with biological parents of foster children and participants of this interview think that this is a reason for many families not to involve in foster care. In many parts of Croatia biological parents come to foster care family to spend some time with their child. This is especially hard if foster family have 3,4,5 children on care to organized family visits (many times mother and father of the child have to come separately and that means more visits). This family visits than make impossible for foster family to organize and spend some quality, free time together. Two foster mothers that participated in the interview coming from the part of Croatia were these visits are organized in the space of foster parents' NGO. Problem is that in some





other parts of Croatia social welfare professionals and some courts insists that those visits should happen in the foster family.

Some issues of the status of foster parents or children in foster care are not resolved yet or they are not solved in the same way throughout the Croatia. For example, just in one part of Croatia, since this year, a break from care is available to foster parents. In some towns, accommodation in the kindergarten is free for foster children, in others they have to pay for kindergarten from child care allowance.

#### Process of matching with child:

- Before it was easier to do the matching since there were more foster parents. Today, social work professionals usually place a child in the family that has “free” place. All interviewees state that matching should be done. It is not about choosing a child but about placing a child in the family that can provide all necessary care and support for that specific child. Some families can take better care of small children, the others are better with teenagers etc. If you place a child in the family that is not capable to offer him/her proper support and care, then that child and the family will suffer and it is possible that foster parents will quit fostering. Some professionals in some local and regional offices of the Croatian Institute for Social Work had and some still have attitude that foster parents cannot “choose” child and they threaten to take their foster care license if they refuse to take a child they want to place in their home, no matter of reasons that foster parents are giving.
- In some cases, there is a possibility to meet with a child before placement and even bring him/her home for weekends or holidays. Usually if there is nearby institution for children without parental care, but in the most cases children are coming from biological families and very often it is an emergency foster care.

#### Perception of the foster parents in general public

- They all agree that general public is more familiar with foster care nowadays than 15 years ago, but still many people, even well educated, never have heard of foster care or don't know the difference between foster care and adoption. Many promotional activities didn't bring the desired results. Public forums do not attract general public except if it is organized in school or by some political party.
- They think that policy makers should work on perception of foster care parents in general public. Foster care parents should be respected and have some privileges for the work that they do – for taking care of children without adequate parental care. Still, even some social work professionals treat foster parents as beneficiaries of social work system while they should be treated as respected partners. Some of the interviewed think that foster parents themselves are also responsible for that and that they should demand of social work professionals to treat them with respect and reject some requests from social work professionals, like to take care of more children than it is prescribed by law or take a child that they estimate are not capable to take care of (sometimes social welfare professionals threaten to revoke their permit if they refuse



to take certain child but they do not refuse a child based on his/her look but on abilities to handle specific problems that child has).

- All participating in this focus group think that today people are not ready to give up their comfort and take care of someone else's child, but to be a foster parents require special dedication and readiness on waiver.





## 6. Conclusion

- Croatia lacks foster parents, especially young and new ones. Majority of foster parents are over 50 years and interest for becoming foster parent is decreasing. New ways of attracting new foster parents are needed but even more important is to secure good support to foster parents from social welfare system in every part of Croatia. In some parts of Croatia support for foster parents is better organized and developed than in other parts.
- Policy makers should work on the perception of foster care parents in general public. Foster care parents should be respected and have some privileges for the work that they do.
- The best way for providing support to foster parents is to organize supervision and support groups. In many cases this is secure through projects and when project ends, this kind of support also ends. Supervision and support groups should have continuity.
- The lack of support is still present in fostering Roma children. There are no Roma mentors/assistants that can help Roma child and foster family during adaptation and language barrier is very big problem.
- New foster parents need more support and different kind of support – from teams for foster care in regional offices, from experienced foster parents, from supervisors and other providers of different social service in community (depending on the problems and potentials that child in foster care have).
- Foster parents are mostly satisfied with available educations/trainings. That is the case when those that organize educations ask foster parents to choose a topic. This has become more and more common practice (regional offices of Croatia Institute for Social Work and foster parents' NGOs).
- Topics that are of interests for foster parents are: digitalisation (some foster parents are computer illiterate), social media, internet security but also other topics that they have already heard – it is good to renew knowledge about the specific developmental problems, dealing with behavioural problems, trauma, relationship with biological parents of foster child etc.
- Not only foster parents need continuous education but professionals working in social welfare system as well. Still, in some areas of Croatia foster parents have impression that they are perceived as beneficiaries of social welfare system, while they should be perceived as partners. We assume that situation will change for the better since recently all regional offices of the Institute for Social Work formed teams for foster care.
- Mentoring (experienced foster parents for new ones) is happening spontaneously and is very needed. It would be good if it can be formalized on some way – to have some kind of register of mentors and give them some kind of recognition.
- Although, according to law regulation, foster families should not have more than 3 children on care due to the lack of foster families, some are fostering 4,5 or even 6 children. Foster mothers participating in focus group stated that this is impacting quality of foster care. Especially since, in the last decade, more and more children in foster care have health, developmental and behavioural problems that require from foster parents more dedication skills, time and knowledge.



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