Family foster care: Perceptions of Portuguese child protection professionals

Mariana Negrão ⓘ * / Maria Ana Mendonça * / Elisa Veiga ⓘ * / Lurdes Veríssimo ⓘ * / Marina Moreira ⓘ *

* Research Centre for Human Development, Faculdade de Educação e Psicologia, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Porto, Portugal

Abstract: Family foster care (FFC) is the preferred out-of-home care measure for the protection of children and youth through Europe, in accordance with research findings of its superiority in meeting developmental needs of children and youth. Portugal, however, does not accompany the European trend in the implementation of FFC. Even after changes made to the law, prioritizing FFC, it represents only 2,7% of out-of-home placements (Instituto de Segurança Social, I.P. [ISS-IP], 2020).
The main goal of this exploratory and descriptive study is to understand the perceptions of Portuguese child protection professionals concerning FFC. 101 participants, from different professional backgrounds and child protection contexts, filled out a questionnaire. Main findings show a heterogeneous degree of familiarity to FFC, and a generally positive although reserved attitude to it. Professionals seem to value its child-centred approach and ability to promote child development and healthy attachment relationships, due to the benefits of a family environment. Participants identified regulations and procedures related to selection, evaluation, training, and support to foster families both as obstacles and necessary conditions for placement success, indicating important arenas where change urges.

Keywords: Family foster care, Perceptions, Child protection professionals.

Family Foster Care (FFC) is an international phenomenon and aims to protect children and young people in danger. The benefits of growing up in a family environment, that is stable and loving, and that has at least one adult that can serve as a trusting caregiver, are widely recognised (Dozier et al., 2014; UNICEF, 1989). Therefore, FFC is generally considered the most adequate out-of-home placement measure to respond to children and young people in danger. The general advantage of FFC relates to its child-centred approach, which contrasts with the depersonalisation, rigidity of routine, staff turnover and pear group instability that often characterize residential care contexts (Dozier et al., 2014; Eurochild, 2014). Differently, in family foster care, the family setting provides a parental figure who ensures the child's needs are met and provides the affection and attention needed, and has been proven more capable to promote overall child development and healthy attachment relationships (e.g., Barber & Delfabbro, 2004, 2005; Buehler et al., 2006; Dregan & Gulliford, 2011; Nelson et al., 2014).

In contradiction to scientific evidence, international recommendations and mainstream practices throughout Europe, Portugal has a minor percentage of FFC placements. However, as of 2015, Portuguese child protection Law was altered, prioritizing family foster care as the measure that

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Mariana Negrão, Research Centre for Human Development, Faculdade de Educação e Psicologia, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Foz Campus, Rua Diogo de Botelho 1327, 4169-005 Porto, Portugal. E-mail: mnegrao@porto.ucp.pt

should be considered and applied, in place of residential care, especially in cases where children are under the age of six (Decreto-Lei n.º 142/2015). Even so data from 2019 shows that only 2,7% of children in care were placed in FFC (Instituto de Segurança Social, I.P. [ISS-IP], 2019, 2020). These numbers show that, in fact, the implementation of this measure does not reflect the recommendations present in the law, and Portugal still lags an embarrassing gap to other European countries when it comes to meet child protection quality standards (Eurochild, 2014).

The ability to promote FFC, beyond many complex political, legal and financial factors will also be dependent on the perceptions that their actors hold about it. Therefore, this study was designed to understand the perceptions of Portuguese child protection professionals regarding family foster care. This is a research topic that gathers scarce research, particularly in the Portuguese context. However, it represents relevant knowledge and a possibly significant piece of information to help to leverage change.

Family foster care: European and Portuguese panorama

There is consensus regarding the need to reduce placement in residential care and prioritise family foster care placements (Del Valle, 2015; Eurochild, 2014). The use of family foster care as an out-of-home placement measure varies considerably across different countries (Ilinca et al., 2015), but in the last decades there has been a considerable decline in residential care placements and a rise in placing children in family foster care (Colton et al., 2006) in countries such as Australia, the United States, United Kingdom, Norway and Sweden (Del Valle, 2015).

Within Europe, figures regarding family foster care placement in 2017 presented high rates in countries such as the United Kingdom – England 78%; Northern Ireland 89%; Scotland 75%, Wales 90% and Norway 89% (Department of Education UK Government, 2018; Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety UK Government, 2018; Scottish Government, 2018; Statistics of Norway, 2020; Welsh Government, 2018). Spain, Hungary and Romania placed about 60% of children and young people in family foster care (Ilinca et al., 2015) and, in France, data from 2013 showed that family foster care was the privileged measure of out-of-home placement (53,3%), compared to 38,6% placed in residential care (Observatoire National de l'Enfance en Danger [ONED], 2013). Despite the growing number of unaccompanied asylum seekers in several European countries, that raise the numbers in residential care placement, which is still relatively common (Ilinca et al., 2015), there has been an increase in the number of placements in family foster care in many European countries (Del Vale, 2015).

In Portugal, family foster care placements do not accompany what is being done in other European countries. The law regarding the protection of children and young people (Lei nº 147/99) underwent significant alterations in 2015 (Decreto-Lei n.º 142/2015), prioritising family foster care as the measure that should be considered and applied, instead of residential care, especially in cases where the child is under the age of six. However, the Portuguese annual report on the foster care system (ISS-IP, 2020) reported that in 2019 there were 7046 children and young people, between the ages of zero and 20, placed in out-of-home care. Among these, 6129 (87%) children and young people were placed in residential care and only 191 (2,7%) were placed in family foster care. The remaining 10% were placed in other measures, such as therapeutic communities and specialized homes.

Family foster care was first institutionalised in Portugal in 1979 (Decreto-Lei n.º 288/79; Delgado, 2010a), and was defined as the temporary placement of a child whose biological family is unable to fulfil its duties regarding the child's upbringing. This temporary placement should provide a family environment that ensures the child's safety, affection and respect, safeguarding his/her personality, name, origin and identity (Decreto-Lei n.º 288/79). The law suffered several alterations but two are particularly worthy of mention: (a) in 2008 an amendment was added, limiting family foster care to people or families that are non-kinship and that are not adoption

candidates (Decreto-Lei n.º 11/2008), breaking from the Mediterranean tradition of family support, still present in countries like Spain, Italy or Romania (Ilinca et al., 2015); (b) in 2015 another amendment made it the preferred measure especially for children under the age of six (Decreto-Lei n.º 142/2015). The current law defines family foster care as the attribution of trust of a child or young person to a singular person or family, qualified for this purpose, that can ensure the child's integration into a family and provide adequate care, responding to the child's needs, wellbeing and education, necessary for their overall development.

Professionals views on family foster care

Child protection in Portugal, as in other countries, is a field of work that gathers professionals from different backgrounds, who are trained and equipped to deal with the issues regarding children and young people at risk, and take part in the decision-making processes that can concern their removal and subsequent placement in out-of-home.

These professionals are social workers; psychologists; social educators; medical doctors; judges; lawyers; representatives of local authorities; representatives of childcare associations (Britner & Mossler, 2002; Davidzon-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008).

Not many studies regarding professionals' perceptions of family foster care could be found. Studies that consider professionals' perceptions in decision making about removal (Davidzon-Arad & Benbenishty, 2008; Delgado et al., 2017) also include some questions about family foster care, but don't expand on what these professionals think about it. In the Portuguese context, in a study conducted by Delgado and colleagues (2017), with a sample of professionals and university students, the authors found that the participants' opinions regarding placement measures (family *vs.* residential care placement), showed no significant differences between groups, and that both professionals and students thought either measure would contribute to the development and well-being of the child or young person. In parallel, in a study regarding children in out-of-home placement, Poso and Laakso (2014) found that, in one of the focus groups, the social workers were critical of the prioritisation of family foster care as the preferred placement measure, because they believed it didn't always meet all the child's needs and it was difficult to find adequate foster homes for children with certain characteristics (e.g., delinquent and violent adolescents).

With scarce literature regarding the professionals' perceptions of family foster care, one aspect to consider is the role of obstacles and enablers in the placement process. Zeijlmans et al. (2018) found that in the matching process, which follows the decision to place a child in family foster care, some of the constraints to child placement are: pressure or lack of time; lack of options, such as insufficient number of families or families that are not suited to the child's needs; incomplete information about the child and their case. One of the issues with family foster care is the risk of a negative placement experience, often a consequence of lowering the bar regarding the quality of the matching, due to an insufficient pool of foster families to choose from (Zeijlmans et al., 2018). Another aspect brought forward is the notion of a "social workers' collective memory" (Forkby & Höjer, 2010), which comprised individual experiences in foster care placement, serving as a means for professionals to decide on placement with a certain family, based on their own placement experience with that family, or based on another team member's experience with a possible family (Poso & Laakso, 2014).

The understanding of why family foster care is such an underrepresented measure in the Portuguese context and the shifting of this situation summon many complex and interacting factors. An important piece of this puzzle concerns the perceptions that child protection professionals have regarding family foster care which are the main object of this study, that aims specifically to: (a) Identify the perception of familiarity and adequacy of the FFC placement measure; (b) Identify the perception of aims, obstacles and necessary conditions for FFC placement; (c) Identify the perception of positive effects and risks of FFC placement.

Method

Participants

The sample, depicted in detail in Table 1, consisted of 101 participants, with a mean age of 38.6 years (*SD*=9.2), ranging from 20 to 58 years of age, the majority being female (91.1%). Of these, 58% reported having a degree and the majority (43.4%) a background in psychology, followed by social services (32.3%) and social education (13.1%). Regarding their workplace, 52.7% reported working at a residential care institution, while 18.3% at the CPCJ (Children and youth protection commission). As for the job title, 32.6% reported being a director, followed by psychologist (23.2%) and social worker (11.6%) and the average number of years of work experience with children and youth at risk was of 10.7 years (*SD*=6.75), ranging from a few months up to 28 years. Participants came from all over Portugal, including the islands, but the majority were from the north of Portugal (89.8%).

Table 1

Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

		n	*%*
Age	20 to 30 years of age	15	17
	31 to 40 years of age	38	43.2
	41 to 50 years of age	26	29.5
	51 or more years of age	9	1.1
Qualifications	Secondary school	1	1
	Degree	58	58
	Master	36	36
	Doctorate	5	5
Field of study	Psychology	43	43.4
	Social Service	32	32.3
	Social Education	13	13.1
	Law	4	4
	Education	4	4
	Other	3	3
Workplace	Residential care institution	49	52.7
	Other	24	25.8
	CPCJ (Children and youth protection commission)	17	18.3
	EMAT (Court multidisciplinary advisory teams)	3	3.2
Job title	Director	31	32.6
	Other	26	27.4
	Psychologist	22	23.2
	Social worker	11	11.6
	Social educator	5	5.3
Number of years of experience	None to 5 years	22	28.4
	6 to 10 years	23	24.3
	11 to 15 years	22	23.2
	16 to 20 years	17	10
	More than 21 years	6	6.4
Geographical location	North	88	89.8
	Centre	5	5.1
	South	2	2
	Portuguese Islands	3	3
Total (*N*=101)			

Instrument

Family Foster Care Perceptions Questionnaire – Professionals' Version (Negrão, Veiga, Veríssimo, Moreira et al., 2019). The questionnaire used in this study is based on that developed

by Negrão, Veiga, Veríssimo and Moreira (2019), created to assess public perceptions of the child protection system and family foster care and was adapted to the specific target group and aims of this study. The *Family Foster Care Perceptions Questionnaire – General Public Version* questionnaire consisted of two parts: a socio-demographic questionnaire and four dimensions assessing: (1) knowledge about child protection system, (2) perception of positive and negative effects of FFC, (3) perceptions of conditions, motivations and barriers to FFC and (4) commitment to FFC. In order to ensure suitability of the questionnaire to the target group of this study, when needed, questions were added, removed, or rephrased, keeping however the questionnaire main structure. The final questionnaire used in this study also consists of two parts: a socio-demographic questionnaire and another one with five groups of questions on the respondents' perceptions of the FFC placement measure, covering: (1) *familiarity and adequacy of FFC and the perception of which is the best measure when a child is in danger*, (2) *aims of placement in FFC*, (3) *obstacles to placemen in FFC,* (4) *necessary conditions to ensure a successful placement in FFC* (5) and *positive effects and risks of placement in FFC.* Both familiarity and perception of adequacy of FFC, were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from: *not at all familiar* to *very familiar* and *not at all adequate* to *very adequate,* respectively. The perception of which is the best measure consisted of a two-part question, where respondents were asked to identify the best measure and give reasons for their choice. Respondents could also submit their own reason(s). Positive effects and risks of FFC were assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, measuring the level of agreement (ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree*) on 12 items relating to possible positive effects and risks of FFC. The last three questions revolve around aims for placement in FFC, obstacles to placement and essential conditions to ensure placement success. For each question, respondents could choose up to three reasons from the options available.

Procedures

The authors' university institutional review board approved the procedures for the study. The research team contacted, via e-mail, professionals and institutions involved in Child Protective Services. These included professionals from residential care institutions; Children and youth protection commissions (CPCJ), court multidisciplinary advisory teams (EMAT) and other non-profit organisations or professionals that play a role in child protection. The data collection was done online using Google Forms. A snowball effect was expected, as respondents were encouraged to share the questionnaire with colleagues. The participation was voluntary, respondents were informed of the objectives of the study, and all ethical implications, such as consent and confidentiality, were safeguarded. Data were analysed using the statistical analysis program IBM SPSS Statistics® v.26.0 (IBM Inc.), including descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results and discussion

Familiarity and adequacy of the FFC placement measure

In terms of the degree of familiarity with the FFC placement measure, respondents' answers ranged from "completely familiar" to "completely unfamiliar". Results displayed in Table 2, show that even though most respondents reported being, to a greater or lesser degree familiar with FFC (69.3%), 11.9% reported being unfamiliar with this placement measure. This may come as a surprise, given the target group of this study, and since FFC was first introduced in the Portuguese law in 1979 and in currently defined by law as the preferred choice for out-of-home placement

especially for younger children. In the light of it, even the 18.8% that state to be neither familiar nor unfamiliar are striking, as one would expect compulsory and deepened knowledge of child protection professionals about the measure. This seems to be signalling the lack of FFC culture and a tradition of institutionalisation (Delgado et al., 2015) present even within the child protection professionals. In this regard it should be noted that 52.7% of the sample consists of professionals working in residential care; however, this fact alone doesn't explain their lack of familiarity regarding FFC.

Table 2

Degree of familiarity with the FFC placement measure

	n	*%*
Completely unfamiliar	2	2
Quite unfamiliar	3	3
Somewhat unfamiliar	7	6.9
Neither familiar nor unfamiliar	19	18.8
Somewhat familiar	20	19.8
Quite familiar	27	26.7
Completely familiar	23	22.8
Total (*N*=101)		

Results regarding the adequacy of the FFC measure reveal that about half of the respondents (*n*=50), consider this to be at least an adequate measure (see Table 3). It is, however, interesting to note that about 30% of respondents do not show a clear positioning, having answered *neither adequate nor inadequate.* This neutral positioning could possibly be tied, once again, to a lack of a FFC culture, since there is little investment in awareness campaigns of the measure (Delgado et al., 2015), leading to a shortage of foster families, making it difficult to recruit new families and retain existing ones. This, in turn, gives professionals little leverage in the matching process, which is an important element for placement success (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003; Zeijlmans et al., 2018), and can contribute to less adequacy of the measure. Also, and until last august (Decreto-Lei n.º 139/2019). There were no updated regulations and criteria for FFC, what can contribute to professionals' insecurities and dissatisfactions with FFC contours, justifying the judgement of relatively poor adequacy.

Table 3

Degree of adequacy of the FFC measure

	n	*%*
Completely inadequate	1	1
Quite inadequate	5	5
Somewhat inadequate	14	13.9
Neither adequate nor inadequate	30	29.7
Somewhat adequate	30	29.7
Quite adequate	12	11.9
Completely adequate	8	7.9
Total (*N*=100)		

Considering the results presented above, inferential statistics were carried out in order to understand whether the number of years of experience was associated with the perception of

familiarity and adequacy of the FFC placement measure. Results showed a significant relationship between the perception of familiarity and perception of adequacy of the measure (r=.295, p=0.01). They also revealed a significant relation between the number of years of professionals' experience and the perception of adequacy of FFC (r_s=.219, p=0.02). Results suggest the more experience professionals have – working in the field, contacting with the children and foster families, witnessing the benefits of the measure or, most probably, witnessing gaps and dissatisfactions of other placement measures most common of the Portuguese Child Protection System, the more they perceive FFC to be an adequate out-of-home placement measure.

Respondents were asked which measure (FFC or residential care) would be best suited in cases where children in danger need to be temporarily removed from their families, and why. Results show that 73% consider FFC to be the best measure (see Table 4). This suggests an attitude of professionals aligned with literature that proposes that a family setting is the most adequate to promote child development (Berrick, 1998; Delgado et al., 2017), which however is not followed by the preference in placements.

Table 4

When a child is in danger and needs to be temporarily removed from his/her family, which is the best measure?

	n	%
Family foster care	72	73.5
Residential care	26	26.5

This positive attitude towards FFC is further corroborated by the reasons evoked to justify it as the best measure: 80% of respondents said *because it promotes the child's overall development* and 63.9% consider *the dynamics better adjusted to the child's needs*. In contrast, the reasons supporting residential care as the best measure show that 50% of responses were related to *protecting children from new losses/discontinued relationships* and 30.8% believe that this measure *does not confuse the child as to whom his/her family is* (see Table 5).

Table 5

Reasons making FFC and residential care the best measure

		FCC		Residential care	
		n	%	*n*	%
Reasons	Because it promotes the child's overall development	58	80.6	4	15.4
	The dynamics are better adjusted to the child's needs	46	63.9	5	19.2
	Does not subject the child to new losses/discontinued relationships	15	20.8	13	50
	There is more control over the environment the child is in	15	20.8	7	26.9
	Other	8	11.1	6	23.1
	There is more control over the child	6	8.3	3	11.5
	Lower costs	3	4.2	0	0
	Does not confuse the child as to whom his/her family is	1	1.4	8	30.8
		Total (*N*=72)		Total (*N*=26)	

Similar results were obtained in a study conducted by Negrão, Moreira et al. (2019), where the authors explored the Portuguese general public's perceptions of FFC. In that study, most respondents (74.1%), considered FFC to be the best measure and 72.5% said that the *dynamics*

were better adjusted to the child's needs. Of those who considered residential care the best measure, 70.6% said that it *did not subject children to new losses/discontinued relationships*. Even though similar results were obtained, the samples had quite distinctive characteristics and the general public's knowledge regarding vulnerable children and youth and child development can't be expected to be equivalent, since professionals should be more aware and better equipped to deal with issues, for example, relating to life transitions or attachment. In this sense, the reason *protecting children from new losses/discontinued relationships* was highly indicated as a supporting reason for residential care, in both the general public and professional samples (70.6% and 50%, respectively). Because of their background, this response rate seems rather high for the professional sample. Certainly research points out that discontinued relationships are a risk for children in care; however, this should be counterbalanced with the opportunity to form repairing bonds, and preferred against never having the chance to form any kind of attachment with a preferred caregiver, a hazard in many residential care contexts (Bowlby, 1979; Howe, 1995; Soares, 2007). Therefore, this research finding calls attention to the need of qualification of professionals and to a paradigm of research-based practice rather than relying on subjective beliefs or worries. Specific training on how to minimize effects of discontinuity on termination of care, and how to ease transitions seem to be particularly relevant within different contexts of the Portuguese child protection system (e.g., transitions into care, out of care back to biological family or adoption), and in light of these results it seem it could also help professionals to be more effective and more confident in applying measures such as FFC, which imply the making and 'breaking' of affective relations.

Aims, obstacles and necessary conditions for FFC

As for aims for placement in FFC, from the options presented (see Table 6), those that stand out are: *enables the normalization of the children's relational and affective lives (*66%); *gives the child a positive family experience* (59%) and tied at 57% is: *enables the establishment of quality attachment relationships* and *allows for individualized care*. Several studies (e.g., Britner & Mossler, 2002; Delgado, 2010b; Dozier et al., 2014; Harden, 2004) indicate that the family setting is the most adequate environment for a child to grow up in. Stable family environments seem to promote resilience and serve as a buffer against the negative impacts of out-of-home placement (Harden, 2004) and professionals' perceptions once again are aligned with these reasoning.

Table 6

Aims for placement in FFC

	n	*%*
Enables the normalization of the children's relational and affective lives	66	66
Gives the child a positive family experience	59	59
Enables the establishment of quality attachment relationships	57	57
Allows for individualized care	57	57
All children have the right to a family	22	22
It complies with the Child Protection Service's principles	18	18
It is best suited for younger children	14	14
It allows families to experience parenthood	2	2
Total (*N*=100)		

Results presented in Table 7 show that, overwhelmingly, professionals feel that *poorly defined training and monitoring process of foster families* and *lack of definition of the selection and*

evaluation criteria for foster families, account for the greatest barriers to FFC placement (90% and 80% respectively). Also worth of noticing a shadow of apprehension about placement success that exists ('uncertainty of placement success' – 44%) that might be fed by previous exposed reasons – lack of evaluation, training and monitoring of families – or might also be the consequence of the illusion of residential care as a more controlled and scrutinized environment.

Table 7

Obstacles to placement in FFC

	n	%
Poorly defined training and monitoring process of foster families	90	90
Lack of definition of the selection and evaluation criteria for foster families	80	80
Uncertainty of placement success	44	44
The foster child's disturbing effect on the foster family	23	23
Demanding level of support from professionals to foster families	21	21
Uncertainty regarding the child's health and temperament	17	17
Possible return to biological families	16	16

Total (*N*=100)

These findings are also consistent with research conducted with foster families, where foster parents perceived the lack of appropriate training and support from professionals as a stressor, affecting the overall fostering experience (Buehler et al., 2003; Delgado et al., 2015; MacGreggor et al., 2006), and also having a negative impact on foster family retention (MacGreggor et al., 2006). Indications of these different informers together should converge attention to these processes and to the need of evidence-based practice.

Respondents were also asked what necessary conditions they believed were needed for placement in FFC. From the options available (see Table 8), the most valued were higher requirement of *selection and evaluation process of candidate quality of training given to foster families* and the *quality of the support given to foster families* during the fostering period.

Table 8

Necessary conditions for placement in FFC

	n	%
Demanding level of the selection and evaluation process of candidate families	59	58.4
Quality of training given to foster families	53	52.5
Quality of the support given to foster families during the fostering period	52	51.5
Selection of families be based on their affective and relational qualities	48	47.5
Support for the child's integration in the foster family	45	44.6
Foster families be given access to better fiscal, labour and financial benefits	13	12.9
Contact with biological family	12	11.9
Possibility of future adoption	9	8.9
Selection of families be based on their available time to foster	7	6.9
Selection of families be based on their financial and residential resources	0	0.0

Total (*N*=101)

Results show that professionals' responses are consistent, in the sense that the obstacles identified are of the same nature as the necessary conditions reported. Regarding necessary conditions for placement, it should be noted that the implementation of the conditions viewed as necessary by professionals are related to their tasks and have direct implications on their workload.

In this respect it is important to recall that the quality of the work and outreach of these professionals can also be affected by excessive workload and by services being understaffed (Delgado et al., 2015). It is therefore, important that the upcoming regulations establishing new procedures don't let this question of understaff unaddressed, in order to promote more efficient practices and to deliver higher quality services both to children at risk and foster families.

Likewise, to some extent, the necessary conditions identified speak also to the lack of definition of procedures. Once more, recent and upcoming regulations are expected to be helpful in defining selection and evaluation criteria, allowing for more efficient child-family matches, which is one of the predictors of placement success (Sinclair & Wilson, 2003).

Positive effects and risks of FFC placement

Table 9

Perception of positive effects and risks

Item	M	SD
1. Foster care is upsetting for the foster parent's biological children	2.08	.091
2. Fostering has positive effects on the fostering couple	3.62	.067
3. It is impossible for a foster child to establish significant relationships with the foster family, if he/she is still in contact with his/her biological family	1.93	.092
4. FFC allows the child to develop healthy family relationships	4.38	.006
5. FFC is emotionally exhausting for the fostering couple	2.85	.099
6. The older the child is, the more difficult it will be for him/her to be integrated into the foster family	3.41	.105
7. The psychological and emotional impact of FFC on children and young people is positive	3.92	.092
8. FFC promotes the foster families' biological children's overall development	3.82	.072
9. Older children and adolescents are unable to develop meaningful relationships with their foster families	2.25	.119
10. FFC has negative consequences for the children because it is temporary	2.39	.102
11. FFC poses a risk to the fostering couples' relationship balance	3.01	.105
12. FFC promotes the child's overall development	4.14	.075

Finally, results from the 12 items related to positive effects and risks associated with FFC are presented in Table 9. The results suggest that professionals seem to agree more with FFC's positive effects, which is reflected in items such as: *FFC allows the child to develop healthy family relationships* (*M*=4.38; *SD*=.006) or *FFC promotes the child's overall development* (*M*=4.14 *SD*=.075). Professionals also seem to perceive items related to risks as less significant, for example: *it is impossible for a foster child to establish significant relationships with the foster family, if he/she is still in contact with his/her biological family* (*M*=1.93; *SD*=.092) and *foster care is upsetting for the foster parent's biological children* (*M*=2.08; *SD*=.091). Professionals seem to agree that because FFC is more child-centred, it offers an integrated vision of child development and attachment, outweighing the potential risks.

Conclusion

There are two main messages that can be summed from the results of this exploratory study targeting professionals' perceptions of family foster care in Portugal. A first message relates to the openness of professionals to FFC, which they perceive as generally positive. This portrayal is backed up by results that show the consideration of FFC as the preferred measure when child

removal from home is needed, the appreciation of the positive effects of FFC, and the appreciation of its' child and relationship related advantages. This vision is however accompanied with a high level of consciousness about the difficulties of the field and a claim of severe changes in the system – specifically in family's selection, training and monitoring – colouring professionals' attitudes towards FFC of some reserve. The second conclusion that is worth highlighting is that, although most of the professionals in the sample were, to a greater or lesser degree, familiar with FFC and considers it at least an adequate measure, a surprising percentage of child protection professionals still admit little familiarity with FFC. This can be symptom of the Portuguese tradition of institutionalisation (Delgado et al., 2015) present even within the child protection professionals, and calls for the reinforcement of training and information given to professionals, might it be academic initial training, or lifelong learning on updated regulations and science on child protection issues. This is crucial, in order to enable professionals to be the most knowledgeable people of the system and the first advocates of its quality. In a country with a low culture and presence of family foster care, these are important agents to promote change. Likewise, even though most considered FFC to be, at least, an adequate out-of-home placement measure, a certain neutrality about its adequacy is noted. Once more this result can be interpreted in relation to a lack of culture on FFC; poor regimentation and consequent little satisfaction with the real experience of the measure; to the demand of higher quality standards; to some defensiveness, less awareness or experience in dealing with the placement measure, as the majority of the sample worked in residential care institutions; or even to work demotivation or under involvement, as we know these professionals are a risk population for burnout and disengagement. A positive finding that deserves to be highlighted in this regard was the positive associations between perception of familiarity, as well as the years of professionals' experience and perception of adequacy of the measure, what reinforces the urgency of specific training in this topic for child protection professionals who come from various academic and professional traditions.

One of the strengths of this study is the fact that little is known about the professionals' perceptions of FFC – a relevant theme in the current scenario of public policy regarding at risk youth in Portugal. On the other hand, this study presents limitations, first related to the sample – small and predominantly concerning the northern region of Portugal – that imposes cautious reading of its results. Therefore, future research should continue to deepen this first approach to professionals' representations using a larger, representative sample, which could also explore differences between professional groups or positions in child protection system. Other aspect that could be relevant to address is the source of knowledge (e.g., literature, specialised training, monitoring of cases in this measure, personal beliefs or common-sense information) that informs professional's perception regarding the FFC measure. In fact, these results lead the research team to wonder how much of the perceptions where based on professional knowledge (may it be empirical or theatrically driven) or based on personal beliefs.

Many changes are needed in order to improve the Portuguese child protection system and time is of the essence. A mandatory change is the incidence of family foster care because of its' benefits to children and youth in danger. This insight into the professionals' perceptions of FFC, although exploratory, presents some clues to changes that are needed and processes that require reinforcement, by informants from 'within'. These professionals seem to be opened to the measure, needed of information but, simultaneously, aware of its obstacles and in need of further training and awareness to the measure specificities. Thus, this study hopes to be a contribute to raise awareness and political and professional will to implement and propel the necessary changes, in terms of regulations, procedures, and actual practices so that child protection services can provide more efficient and timely interventions for these vulnerable and attention worthy children and youth.

Funding

This research didn't have fundings.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: MN, EV, LV; Methodology: MN, MAM, EV, LV, MM; Formal analysis: MAM, LV; Investigation: MN, MAM, EV, MM; Data curation: LV; Writing – Original draft preparation: MN, MAM; Writing – Review and editing: MN, EV, LV.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

References

Barber, J., & Delfabbro, P. (2004). *Children in foster care*. Routledge.

Barber, J., & Delfabbro, P. (2005). Children's adjustment to long-term foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *27*(3), 329-340. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2004.10.010

Berrick, J. (1998). When children cannot remain home: Foster family care and kinship care. *The Future of Children, 8*(1), 72-87.

Britner, P., & Mossler, D. (2002). Professionals' decision-making about out-of-home placements following instances of child abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 26*(4)*, 317-332.

Bowlby, J. (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. Tavistock.

Buehler, C., Cox, M. E., & Cuddeback, G. (2003). Foster parents' perceptions of factors that promote or inhibit successful fostering. *Qualitative Social Work, 2*(1), 61-83. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325003002001281

Buehler, C., Rhodes, K., Orme, J., & Cuddeback, G. (2006). The potential for successful family foster care: Conceptualizing competency domains for foster parents. *Child Welfare, 85*(3)*, 523-558.

Colton, M., Roberts, S., & Williams, M. (2006). The recruitment and retention of family foster-carers: An international and cross-cultural analysis. *British Journal of Social Work, 38*(5), 865-884. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcl375

Davidzon-Arad, B., & Benbenishty, R. (2008). The role of workers' attitudes and parent and child wishes in protection workers' assessments and recommendation regarding removal and reunification. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(1)*, 107-121.

Decreto-Lei n.º 288/79, de 13 de agosto. *Diário da República, Série I*(186), 1908-1910. https://dre.pt/web/guest/pesquisa/-/search/377750/details/normal?q=decreto-lei+n%C2%BA%20288%2F79

Decreto-Lei n.º 11/2008, de 17 de janeiro. *Diário da República, Série I*(12), 552-559. https://dre.pt/pesquisa/-/search/248483/details/maximized

Decreto-Lei n.º 142/2015, de 8 de setembro. *Diário da República, Série I*(175), 7198-7232. https://dre.pt/home/-/dre/70215246/details/maximized?p_auth=d7wl5lmP

Decreto-Lei n.º 139/2019, de 16 de setembro. *Diário da República, Série I*(177), 11-29. https://dre.pt/application/conteudo/124716448

Del Vale, J. (2015). *Out-of-home care in Europe: An overview*. http://www.google.com/url?q=https://engi.eu/wp-content/plugins/download-attachments/includes/download.php%3Fid%3D400&sa=U&ved=0ahUKEwj33b7Li5XfAhXXSRUIHafkBMYQFggjMAQ&usg=AOvVaw3anJHlkUVOtSSqXwGmjiYn

Delgado, P. (2010a). A reforma do acolhimento familiar de crianças: Conteúdo, alcance e fins do novo regime jurídico. *Análise Social, 48*(196), 555-580.

Delgado, P. (2010b). A experiência da vinculação e o acolhimento familiar: Reflexões, mitos e desafios. *Temas em Psicologia, 28*(2), 457-467.

Delgado, P., López, M., Carvalho, J., & Del Valle, J. F. (2015). Acolhimento familiar em Portugal e Espanha: Uma investigação comparada sobre a satisfação dos acolhedores. *Psychology/Psicologia Reflexão e Crítica, 28*(4), 840-848. https://doi.org/10.1590/1678-7153.201528423

Delgado, P., Pinto, V., & Carvalho, J. (2017). Attitudes and decision-making in the child protection system: A comparison of students and professionals. *Criminology & Social Integration Journal, 25*(2), 2-14.

Department of Education UK Government. (2018). *The fostering statistics*. https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety UK Government. (2018). *The fostering statistics*. https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics

Dozier, M., Kaufman, J., Kobak, R., O'Connor, T. G., Sagi-Schwartz, A., Scott, S., Shauffer, C., Smetana, J., van IJzendoorn, M. H., & Zeanah, C. H. (2014). Consensus statement on group care for children and adolescents: A statement of policy of the American Orthopsychiatric Association. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *84*(3), 219-225. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000005

Dregan, A., & Gulliford, M. (2011). Foster care, residential care and public care placement patterns are associated with adult life trajectories: Population-based cohort study. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *47*(9), 1517-1526. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-011-0458-5

Eurochild. (2014). *Opening doors for Europe's children: Deinstitutionalisation and quality alternative care for children in Europe. Lessons learned and the way forward working paper*. http://www.openingdoors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/DI_Lessons_Learned_web_use.pdf

Forkby, T., & Höjer, S. (2010) Navigations between regulations and gut instinct: The unveiling of collective memory in decision-making processes where teenagers are placed in residential care. *Child and Family Social Work, 16*(2), 159-168. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2010.00724.x

Harden, B. J. (2004). Safety and stability for foster children: A developmental perspective. *The Future of Children, 14*(1), 31-47. https://doi.org/10.2307/1602753

Howe, D. (1995) .Adoption and attachment. *Adoption & Fostering 19*(4), 7-15. https://doi.org/10.1177/030857599501900403

Ilinca, S., Leichsenring, K., Zólyoni, E., & Rodrigues, R. (2015). *Serbian Project SAVE – European Protection Systems in the areas of childcare and long-term care: Good practices and lessons learned*. http://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.euro.centre.org/downloads/detail/1535&sa=U&ved=0ahUKEwil-dql1pXfAhVBQxUIHeVcAvEQFggUMAA&usg=AOvVaw0-iakRHn3Fhh84SqNu6l6a

Instituto de Segurança Social, I.P. [ISS-IP]. (2019). *CASA 2018 – Relatório de caracterização anual da situação de acolhimento das crianças e jovens*. Instituto de Segurança Social.

Instituto de Segurança Social, I.P. [ISS-IP]. (2020). *CASA 2019 – Relatório de caracterização anual da situação de acolhimento das crianças e jovens*. Instituto de Segurança Social.

Lei n.º 147/99, de 1 de setembro [Lei de Protecção de Crianças e Jovens em Perigo]. *Diário da República, Série I-A*(204), 552-559. http://www.pgdlisboa.pt/leis/lei_print_articulado.php?tabela=leis&artigo_id=&nid=545&nversao=&tabela=leis

MacGregor, T. E., Rodger, S., Cummings, A. L., & Leschied, A. W. (2006). The needs of foster parents: A qualitative study of motivation, support, and retention. *Qualitative Social Work*, *5*(3), 351-368. https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325006067365

Negrão, M., Moreira, M., Veríssimo, L., & Veiga, E. (2019). Conhecimentos perceções públicas acerca do acolhimento familiar: Contributos para o desenvolvimento da medida. *Análise Psicológica, 37*(1), 81-92. https://doi.org/10.14417/ap.1564

Negrão, M., Veiga, E., Veríssimo, L., & Moreira, M. (2019). *Questionário sobre perceções acerca do acolhimento familiar*. Unpublished manuscript.

Negrão, M., Veiga, E., Veríssimo, L., Moreira, M., & Mendonça, M. (2019). *Questionário sobre perceções acerca do acolhimento familiar – Versão para profissionais*. Unpublished manuscript.

Nelson, C. A., Fox, N. A., & Zeanah, C. H. (2014). *Romania's abandoned children: Deprivation, brain development, and the struggle for recovery.* Harvard University Press.

Observatoire National de l'Enfance en Danger [ONED]. (2013). *Institut National de la Jeunesse et de l'Éducation Populaire (INJEO)*. https://solidarites-sante.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/RAn20130521.pdf

Poso, T., & Laakso, R. (2014) Matching children and substitute homes: Some theoretical and empirical notions. *Child and Family Social Wo*rk, *21*(3), 307-316. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12144

Scottish Government. (2018). *The fostering statistics*. https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics

Sinclair, I., & Wilson, K. (2003). Matches and mismatches: The contribution of carers and children to the success of foster placements. *The British Journal of Social Work, 33*(7), 871-884. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/33.7.871

Soares, I. (2007). *Relações de vinculação ao longo do desenvolvimento: Teoria e avaliação*. Psiquilibrios Edições.

Statistics of Norway. (2020). https://www.ssb.no/en/sosiale-forhold-og-kriminalitet/statistikker/barneverng/aar

UNICEF. (1989). Convention on the rights of the child. In E. Lawson (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human rights* (1996, 2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis.

Welsh Government. (2018). *The fostering statistics*. https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics

Zeijlmans, K., López, M., Grietens, H., & Knorth, E. J. (2018). "Nothing goes as planned": Practitioners reflect on matching children and foster families. *Child & Family Social Work, 23*(3), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12437

Acolhimento familiar: Perceções dos profissionais do sistema de promoção e proteção em Portugal

Resumo: O Acolhimento familiar (AF) é uma medida de colocação considerada preferencial no quadro da promoção e proteção de crianças e jovens em risco, em linha com a evidência científica que suporta a sua capacidade de responder às necessidades desenvolvimentais de crianças e jovens. No entanto, Portugal não acompanha a tendência europeia de implementação do AF. Mesmo após mudanças legislativas que priorizam o AF, este representa apenas 2,7% das colocações em acolhimento em Portugal (Instituto de Segurança Social, I.P. [ISS-IP], 2020).

Este estudo, exploratório e descritivo, tem como objetivo principal conhecer as perceções dos profissionais do sistema de promoção e proteção de crianças e jovens relativamente à medida de AF. Participaram no estudo 101 profissionais provenientes de vários contextos do sistema de promoção e proteção em Portugal. Os resultados mostram um nível heterogéneo de familiaridade com o AF, e uma

atitude geral positiva, embora com reservas. Os profissionais valorizam o AF pelo facto de ser centrado na criança, promotor de relações de vinculação de qualidade e de um desenvolvimento saudável. Os participantes identificaram os procedimentos de seleção, avaliação, formação e acompanhamento às famílias de acolhimento tanto como obstáculos, como condições necessárias ao sucesso da medida, indicando estas como áreas fundamentais em que a mudança urge.

Palavras-chave: Acolhimento familiar, Profissionais do sistema de promoção e proteção.