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Individual and emotional experiences of the vesos foster children aged 6 to 12 in togo

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Abstract

Foster children are often in search of affection and can, in some cases, demonstrate this search by violent behavior. These children are subject to mixed feelings toward both their natural and foster homes.

This study is exploratory. The purpose is to identify how growing up in an SOS Children's Village (VESOS) is experienced by children Togolese involved. The aim is to observe the peer pressure and the relationship issues with their foster mothers. A semi-structured interview has been conducted on a sample of 93 VESOS children and 69 ordinary children living with their natural families, aged 6 to 12. The majority of the VESOS children (64.52%) prefer to live in the SOS village rather than in their natural family or anywhere else. Knowing the main indicators of children's individual experiences at the VESOS will help determine the appropriate therapy required for these foster children in Togo.

Key-words: Children, fostering in VESOS, individual experience, resilience, Togo.

Introduction

Foster children have a feeling of loss or abandonment that often makes them constantly circumspect and reactive [1]. Their negative attitudes toward adult people, their feelings and aggressive behavior that they used in the past as a means of survival still exist in their new social environments [1,2,3]. Even if fostering is highly rated as a therapeutic measure, it is necessary to examine the approach to be adopted by their foster parents and its benefits on the child's development [1]. It is therefore quite interesting to take a careful look at the foster children's daily existence in the VESOS homes in Togo. (The VESOS are integrated components of the ''SOS Villages d'Enfants'' which is an International No-Governmental Organization. It is specialized in fostering orphans and abandoned children on a long-time basis.)

Context of child admission in foster homes in Africa and in Togo

From a traditional point of view, child admission in foster homes is interpreted as entrusting the child to the care of the extended family network. The admission rate in foster homes of children aged 10 to 14 in 20 African countries is approximately 20 percent, varying from 9 to 42 percent [4]. Child admission in foster homes is explained by the customary obligations for informal family solidarity, education, protection in case of the death of a parent, child labor contribution, economic reason, the fact that the child belongs rather to the ancestry lineage than to a couple [5,6]. Though this specific child fostering system has played a great protection role in the past, nowadays, it is, however, marred with serious drawbacks due child abuse and exploitation [5].

Individual and family background lives of foster children

Children in foster institutions suffer from a lack of affection due to the death of a parent, desertion, neglect, child abuse, accusation of witchcraft [7]. Previous traumas have a negative impact on their behavior and attitude in their new social environment [1,2,3,8,9].

Personal experiences and feelings of foster children

Foster children have a strong feeling of a great loss. They expect nothing good from adults. They are suspicious of others and, at times, feel torn between their foster and natural families [1]. They show great

emotional greed. They are aggressive, and test the limits of the foster parents' patience. They take the risk of being rejected and sometimes they put in check the foster family [2].

They may want to return to their original parents despite a deleterious life [3]. Nevertheless, foster parents are able to help them build up self-confidence, their efficiency and to develop their feelings of belonging to the same family [1].

Problems and hypothesis

This exploratory study aims to explore how growing-up in a VESOS is experienced by the foster children themselves. The issue is to observe the foster children's relationships with their peers and with their surrogate mothers and to analyze their personal experiences and feelings. Our hypothesis is that there is a significant difference between the VESOS children and their counterparts living in their natural family at their experiences in the following areas: their daily life, their feelings, their emotions and family relationships.

Methodology

This study is carried out on 93 foster children of the three VESOS of Togo and on 69 children living in natural family (control group), aged 6 to 12 years. VESOS children live in these villages for at least three years. These are orphans, children of parents suffering from mental sickness, children accused of witchcraft, abandoned children, neglected and abused children. A semi-structured interview explores their individual experiences, feelings and their family ties. Data from the semi-structured interview were classified thematically and analyzed statistically. Comparison of the two samples with the Z test has identified differences between the two groups of children.

Results

Indicators of children's experiences	VESOS Children	Focus group children
Feeling of well-being in family	45(47.87%)	58(77.34%)* p=0.0001
Feeling of uneasiness in family	39(41.49%)	16(21.33%)* p=0.0069
Positive image of foster mother/ natural mother	95(84.82%)	109(63.37%)* p=0.0016
Acceptance of the child by others and common games	69(62.16%)	79(45.16%)* P=0.0315
Child physical abuse	12(10.81%)	14(08.00%) P=0.5485
Child emotional abuse	11(09.91%)	12(06.86%) p=0.4938
Feeling of being loved by foster mother/natural mother	30(32.26%)	26(38.24%) p=0.4295

**significant difference; figures represent the total numbers or frequencies and corresponding percentages are in parenthesis*

According to these results, the majority of the VESOS children (64.52%) prefer to live in the SOS village rather than in their natural family or anywhere else. They justify their preference by the accommodation comfort, the protection and security (17.95%), the entertainment games and presents (15.38%), the feeling of being loved, and the quality of education (12.82%), the high schooling attendance (12.82%), and the good quality of food (12.26%). The control group children feel more at ease than their VESOS counterparts. However, the VESOS children have a more positive image of the SOS foster mother. Compared to the control group, children VESOS feel more accepted by their peers and prefer to play with them. Children VESOS explain their welfare family by physical conditions, emotional and relational dimensions: to play with other children (21.57%), to have the feeling of being surrounded by friends, to have a good surrogate mother and to be well fed (17.65%).

In contrast, among children who don't feel at ease, 13.73% of them point at the death of (a) parent/s or the fact of not knowing their parents, 07.84% report physical and emotional abuse in both the VESOS and natural family homes, 05.88% have frequent nightmares caused by past traumas. 83.08% of foster children appreciate the SOS foster mother's attitude. Approximately 6% denounces physical and emotional abuse, deprivation of food and leisure.

Discussion

The results of the current study are similar to those of the literature review. The daily experiences and the well-being of foster children are less influenced by material conditions than by human relationships [10]. As far as the foster children are concerned, these results highlight the importance of children, family and peer relationships. These children often entertain warm relationships with their SOS foster mothers, their natural family members, with the administrative and teaching staff, and with their peers at school. Relationships with peers [10,11] or with foster siblings [8], could play a protection role when relationships with parents are strained. These relationships could contribute to the psychological, psychosocial development and to children's resilience.

Conclusion

The knowledge of the main indicators of subjective and emotional experiences of the children in the VESOS homes and factors that influence these experiences should guide therapeutic interventions in favor of children in Togo. The VESOS homes provide an appreciable social protection to foster children. These children like the material comfort and the care of their foster mothers. Though they are safe from many dangerous situations to which they were exposed in their natural family homes or customary adoption situations, traumas they went through must be taken into account more.

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