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What Makes a Good Foster Parent? Exploring the Value System of Foster Caregivers



ABSTRACT

This study investigates the value system inherent in foster parenting to clarify the perceived importance of various characteristics attributed to a „good foster parent.” Utilizing a quantitative approach, foster parents were asked to rate fourteen predefined traits, categorized into moral expectations, practical skills, and given attributes. The findings largely confirmed the initial hypothesis that moral values would be rated highest, while attributes like strictness or religious practice would show more varied responses. Notably, practical aspects such as the willingness to seek and accept help, and viewing foster care as a vocation, were also ranked among the most crucial characteristics. Conversely, self-sacrifice was deemed relatively less important than anticipated. The study reveals that the perceived importance of these values is predominantly personality-dependent, showing minimal correlation with socio-cultural backgrounds or specific aspects of the foster parents’ careers, apart from minor links between altruism and education level, and vocational commitment with long-term fostering plans. These insights carry significant implications for the recruitment, training, and support of foster parents.

KEYWORDS

Foster Care, Foster Parents, Value System, Child Welfare, Parenting Qualities, Moral Values, Professional Development in Fostering, Hungary

DOI 10.14232/belv.2025.1.12

<https://doi.org/10.14232/belv.2025.1.12>

Cikkre való hivatkozás / How to cite this article:

Kothencz, János: What Makes a Good Foster Parent? Exploring the Value System of Foster Caregivers. Belvedere Meridionale vol. 37. no. 1. pp 183-188.

ISSN 1419-0222 (print)

ISSN 2064-5929 (online, pdf)

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1. INTRODUCTION

The role of foster parents is pivotal within the child welfare system, offering essential care and stability to children unable to reside with their biological families. A thorough understanding of the values and characteristics that constitute a „good foster parent” is fundamental for effective recruitment, targeted training programs, and ultimately, ensuring positive developmental outcomes for children in care (cf. Sevita Blog, 2024.; JOHNSON 2005). This study aims to explore the value system of foster caregivers, seeking to elucidate the perceived importance of various traits and attributes central to the foster parenting role in the Hungarian context. It is posited that values, mediated through attitudes, significantly influence actions and are therefore reflected in the day-to-day practice of foster care. Rather than relying on self-assessment, this research employed a methodology wherein participants rated the applicability of a list of value-laden characteristics to the abstract construct of an „ideal good foster parent”.

The existing international literature underscores various qualities such as stability, empathy, patience, and the ability to work within a team as crucial for foster parents (JOHNSON 2004; DELFABBRO et. al. 2010). Research in Hungary has also highlighted the complexities and specific needs within the national child protection system (see Kothencz J., *Róluk... értük... I*; Kothencz J., *Nevelőszülők Magyarországon*). This study seeks to build upon this by examining how Hungarian foster parents specifically prioritize these and other values, contributing to a deeper understanding that can inform national child welfare strategies.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To investigate the value system of foster parents, a quantitative research design was implemented. Participants were provided with a list of fourteen distinct characteristics and were tasked with evaluating their respective importance to the conceptual model of a „good foster parent”. These characteristics were pre-categorized by the researchers into three distinct groups to facilitate analysis.

The first group comprised seven traits representing highly valued moral expectations within the foster care context. These included: a stable value system, adherence to moral norms, fairness/justice, helpfulness, self-sacrifice, social sensitivity, and a genuine love for children.

The second group encompassed four characteristics framed as practical skills and attitudes: „dares and knows how to ask for help,” „dares and knows how to accept help,” „considers foster parenting a profession/vocation,” and „is continuously engaged in self-improvement and training”.

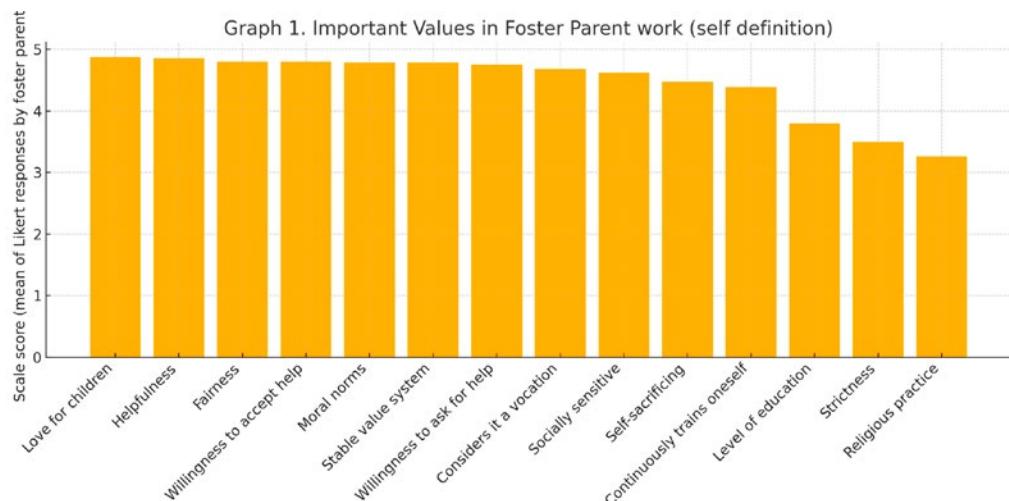
The third group consisted of three characteristics viewed more as given attributes rather than explicit expectations, although they could be considered as such from certain perspectives. These were: strictness, level of formal education (schooling), and engagement in religious practice. The challenges related to children with special needs, which can intersect with these

perceived desirable qualities, have also been explored in other work by the author (KOTHENCZ 2024).

The primary hypothesis was that this tripartite structure would be mirrored in the respondents' evaluations, with the first group (moral expectations) anticipated to receive the highest importance ratings, and the third group (given attributes) expected to demonstrate the most significant divergence in perceived importance among respondents.

3. Results

The study's initial expectations were largely substantiated by the data. Characteristics within the third group (level of education, strictness, religious practice) indeed exhibited the greatest variability in opinion among the surveyed foster parents, while those in the first group (moral values) were, as predicted, rated the highest in importance. However, the analysis also revealed two unexpected deviations from the initial hypothesis. Firstly, behaviors related to seeking and accepting help, along with the perception of foster parenting as a vocation (from the second group), were elevated by respondents into the cluster of most important characteristics. Secondly, the characteristic of „self-sacrifice” was considered relatively less directive or central than the researchers had anticipated.



Source: own editing based on Nevelőszülők 2024.

Overall, the average scores for the evaluated characteristics were notably high, indicating that a significant majority of foster caregivers attribute outstanding importance to humanistic values in their work. (Original document reference: 1. Scores: „Love for children” 4.88, „Helpfulness” 4.86, „Fairness” 4.80, „Willingness to accept help” 4.80, „Moral norms” 4.79, „Stable value system” 4.79, „Willingness to ask for help” 4.75, „Considers it a vocation” 4.68, „Socially sensitive” 4.62, „Self-sacrificing” 4.47, „Continuously trains oneself” 4.39, „Level of education” 3.80, „Strictness” 3.50, „Religious practice” 3.26).

Eleven of the fourteen characteristics were rated with a high degree of similarity by the respondent foster parents, and the distribution of their responses typically followed a J-distribution

pattern. In contrast, the perceived importance of level of education, strictness, and religious practice was not as uniformly endorsed across the foster parent community. The distribution of responses for these three items showed a discernible shift towards a normal (bell-curve) distribution, and they were collectively considered the least important among the fourteen characteristics presented.

A further analysis focused on respondents who either negated („not at all characteristic” or „rather not characteristic”) or relativized („both yes and no”) the importance of the seven most highly rated characteristics (love for children, helpfulness, fairness, willingness to ask for and accept help, moral norms, stable value system). These constituted relatively small segments, ranging from 13 to 49 individuals for each characteristic. For traits such as „professional commitment (vocation)” and „social sensitivity,” this group comprised approximately 92-95 individuals. For „self-sacrifice” and „continuous training,” the number of such respondents was nearly 200 (specifically, 179–182 individuals). Regarding the three most divisive traits (level of education, strictness, religious practice), several hundred respondents (ranging from 486 to 705 individuals) did not rate them as highly important.

An examination was conducted for all fourteen properties to determine if these two opinion groups (those rating a property highly vs. those not) exhibited significant differences in terms of key social characteristics. It was anticipated, even without precise calculations, that the importance of education would be more strongly emphasized by more educated individuals, the importance of religious practice by those who actively practice a religion, and the willingness to seek and accept help by those who themselves tend to seek and accept help. However, there were no pre-existing hypotheses regarding potential social or professional distinctions underlying the preference for humanistic-moral values.

The findings strongly suggest that the degree to which an individual considers upbringing-ethical values to be important is almost entirely personality-dependent. The evaluation of foster parent characteristics did not show any substantial correlation with the socio-cultural backgrounds of the respondents or with characteristics related to their foster care careers. Only two correlations of note were identified:

Altruism (self-sacrifice) demonstrated a relationship with the level of education: individuals with lower formal educational attainment (those who had not completed secondary school) considered this trait less important than those who had completed secondary school or possessed higher education degrees.

The importance of a sense of vocation (professional commitment) was most significantly emphasized by foster parents who envisioned themselves fostering for a period exceeding ten years.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer significant insights into the value priorities of Hungarian foster parents, highlighting a strong emphasis on core humanistic and moral values. The high ranking of attributes like love for children, helpfulness, fairness, and a stable value system resonates with international literature identifying desirable qualities in foster caregivers (DELFABBRO et. al. 2010, n.d.; SEVITA Blog, 2024.).

A particularly noteworthy finding is the „elevation” of practical aspects such as the willingness to seek and accept help, and viewing foster parenting as a vocation, into the top tier of important traits. This may reflect an increasing awareness of the complexities of the fostering role and the necessity of support and professional identity (Justice Resource Institute, n.d.). Indeed, the quality of collaboration with the foster care system and child welfare workers is crucial for foster parents’ motivation and satisfaction (ZANANI 2024; GOUVEIA et al. 2021).

The relatively lower, though still acknowledged, importance attributed to „self-sacrifice” could indicate a nuanced understanding of sustainable caregiving. This perspective values the well-being of the foster parent as integral to providing stable, long-term care, moving away from a model potentially based on complete self-abnegation.

Perhaps the most striking outcome is the predominantly personality-dependent nature of these value attributions, with minimal correlation to socio-demographic or specific career-related variables. This suggests that intrinsic personal qualities, shaped possibly by life experiences more than formal qualifications or specific training alone, are primary determinants of what foster parents deem essential for their demanding role. This has considerable implications for recruitment and selection processes, suggesting that exploring candidates’ underlying value orientations and inherent personality traits could be highly beneficial. While training is vital (THOMPSON 2019, initial predispositions may play a more significant role in value alignment.

The varied views on the importance of formal education, strictness, and religious practice also warrant attention. While these are not dismissed, their lower and more diverse ratings suggest they are not universally seen as core prerequisites for „good” foster parenting, allowing for a broader range of individuals to potentially fill the role effectively. The specific context of Hungarian foster care, with its own historical and cultural specificities, further enriches these findings (KOTHENCZ 2007a).

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study successfully identified a distinct hierarchy of values that Hungarian foster parents perceive as crucial for effective and „good” foster care. Paramount among these are core moral attributes and a profound child-centeredness, which are complemented by practical abilities related to help-seeking and a professional commitment to the fostering role. The significant finding that these value preferences appear to be largely personality-dependent, rather than strongly tied to socio-cultural or professional backgrounds, underscores the nuanced complexity of defining, identifying, and nurturing „good” foster parents.

These findings have clear implications for policy and practice within the Hungarian child welfare system, particularly in the areas of recruitment, selection, and ongoing support for foster families. While continuous training and professional development are essential, identifying individuals with inherently aligned value systems and personality traits during the recruitment phase could be a key factor in ensuring long-term placement stability and positive outcomes for children in care. Further research focusing on the development and validation of tools to assess these personality-dependent value orientations could be beneficial.

Future research could beneficially delve deeper into these personality dimensions and explore methodologies for assessing value orientations in prospective foster parents within the

Hungarian context. Longitudinal studies investigating how different value profiles among foster parents correlate with child well-being, placement success rates, and foster parent retention would also provide valuable contributions to the field.

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