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Estrategias para la captación de familias acogedoras

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Published in:
Papeles del Psicólogo

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2010

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lopez Lopez, M., Del Valle, J. F., & Bravo, A. (2010). Estrategias para la captación de familias acogedoras. *Papeles del Psicólogo*, 31(3), 289-295.

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STRATEGIES FOR RECRUITING FOSTER FAMILIES

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Fostering provides children with an opportunity to grow and develop in a family environment until the source of separation from their families is resolved, they are adopted or they emancipate on reaching the age of majority. Finding families ready to look after those children is one of the most important challenges for foster care systems in the next decade. This paper aims to review international procedures for the recruitment of foster families. The most successful recruitment interventions are those aimed at the general population, involving experienced foster parents, using all available resources, and sending objective messages about what this decision entails. Previous research also underlines the need for yearly recruitment and sensitization plans, and assessment systems of the strategies used. Several guidelines are offered in this paper for agencies and managers of foster programs.

Key words: Foster care, Recruitment, Foster families

El acogimiento familiar provee a niños y niñas la oportunidad de crecer y desarrollarse en un ambiente familiar, mientras esperan que se resuelva aquello que provocó la separación de su familia o bien son adoptados o se independizan al cumplir la mayoría de edad. Encontrar familias dispuestas a acoger a estos niños supone uno de los principales retos para el sistema de protección durante la próxima década. Este artículo lleva cabo una revisión de las prácticas internacionales para la captación de familias acogedoras. Las intervenciones de captación exitosas son aquellas que se dirigen a toda la comunidad, implican en sus intervenciones a los acogedores veteranos, usan todos los medios a su alcance y envían mensajes realistas sobre lo que supone acoger. La investigación también subraya la necesidad de llevar a cabo planes de captación y sensibilización anuales y de contar con sistemas de evaluación de las estrategias. En el artículo se aportan una serie de pautas para gestores y técnicos de programas de acogida.

Palabras clave: Acogimiento familiar, Captación, Familias acogedoras

Fostering is a child protection measure that provides the child with a family with whom to live and receive protection and education, desirably as a temporary arrangement, until the child can return to his/her family of origin or go on to an adoptive family. Although our system opened the door to this resource more than twenty years ago, the development of fostering programs is still very slow and unequal in the different autonomous communities (Del Valle, López, Montserrat and Bravo, 2008). As opposed to other surrounding countries, in Spain the impulse needed for these programs has not yet been attained and not even the development of an acceptable social sensitization towards this measure. A study by Del Valle and Bravo (2003) revealed that in 2002 the placements of children presented a proportion of 85% in institutionalized care and 15% in foster families. In addition, 84% of the foster care placements were with extended families and 16% with

non-relative families. Faced with this reality, in the last few years, a firm conviction by administrations regarding the necessity of strongly backing foster programs can be detected.

Although it may seem quite obvious, it is convenient to keep in mind that the basic ingredient of a foster program is the collaborating families. Creating a heterogeneous pool of well-trained and well-supported fostering families, who are willing to take care of children with very diverse profiles and necessities, seems to be the recipe for the success of these programs (Sinclair, 2005). However, this is not at all an easy task; to the social changes undergone by our society in the last few years (the incorporation of women into the workforce, the increase in the number of single parent families, etc.), we have to add the current economic situation, that for many professionals has been a decisive factor which further hinders the already complex search for fostering families.

In the last few years, many professionals and administrations have shown their great concern for the scarcity of fostering families and the difficulties in the

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development of successful campaigns for the recruitment of new foster parents. For this reason, the objective of this article is to offer a series of key points in the execution of recruitment campaigns. Given the lack of rigorous assessment of the Spanish programs, a review of international research, especially Anglo-Saxon, has been conducted. We do not intend to make an exhaustive analysis of the scientific literature on the topic, but rather to offer a working document for the managers and people in charge of foster care programs so that it may help them to direct future strategies.

A first premise that must be assumed is that Foster programs need to develop an annual strategy for the sensitization and recruitment of Foster families with the meticulous timing of every activity to be performed. Research has shown how those Foster care programs that have an annual strategic plan for Foster family recruitment are more successful at increasing the pool of Foster families than those programs that perform occasional activities without a well-defined comprehensive strategy (General Accounting Office, 1989).

Next, a proposal for a strategy of sensitization and recruitment of Foster families is presented through a series of phases and recommendations based on international scientific evidence.

**FIGURE 1
WHO FOSTERS IN SPAIN?**

- ✓ Most foster families are comprised of married couples (82%)
- ✓ The mean age of foster carers is 46-47 years.
- ✓ 41.2% of foster carers have university studies and 32.1% high school.
- ✓ The most common work status is that both members of the family work (64%) in the case of families comprised of a couple.
- ✓ Around 40% make €24,000 per year or more.
- ✓ More than half of the families (59%) have children of their own (in 4.1% these are adopted) and the mean number of children per family is 2.1.
- ✓ In relation to the foster child, the children are older in 77% of the cases.
- ✓ 23% of the families were fostering multiple children.
- ✓ The mean number of years the families have been fostering is 5.1 years.
- ✓ The motivation to foster is the desire to "help a child" (45%) and the "experience of motherhood or fatherhood" (31%).
- ✓ The most common way of learning about the existence of foster care programs is through publicity campaigns in 26% of the cases and through friends or family in 24%.

Source: López, M., Montserrat, C., Del Valle, J.F., and Bravo, A. (2010). El acogimiento en familia ajena en España. Una evaluación de la práctica y sus resultados [Non-relative family foster care in Spain: Practice and outcome assessment]. *Infancia y Aprendizaje*, 33(2), 269-280.

Gathering of information regarding the current functioning of the program

A complete review of how the foster care program is being carried out can help determine the main objectives of the foster care recruitment campaign. Initially, it seems useful to identify the profile and necessities of the children that are already in Foster homes or that are in institutional care waiting to be fostered. Knowing these data allows us to identify gaps or priority areas for the recruitment of foster families. Some questions that must be answered by the initial assessment of the foster care program are: Who are the fostered children? And those who are waiting to be fostered? Who has been recruited in the last campaigns? Where should we find new foster parents?

In this regard, the Research group on Family and Children of the University of Oviedo has recently conducted a nation-wide assessment of Foster care that can help determine the profiles of foster children and families (Del Valle et al., 2008; available on www.gifi.es). Figure 1 presents a portrait of those who are fostering non-relative children in Spain. Nevertheless, we must not forget that such profiles (and processes) can be extremely heterogeneous among the different Spanish Autonomous Communities and, therefore, it would be ideal to develop a starting study that will allow us to know in depth the reality of the context on which we are going to work.

Analyzing the functioning of the foster care program before beginning to work may be very useful. A very advisable way of obtaining this information is through direct consultation with the foster parents that are part of the program. Aspects such as how they became familiar with fostering, their motivation for becoming a foster parent, their degree of satisfaction with the service, the support received or the most complex areas of their task, can be crucial in knowing how the intervention is being carried out and how it can be improved.

In addition, questions relative to motivation or finding out about the program help us to understand which recruitment strategies are more successful and how to tailor the foster parents' motivations to the objective of the intervention.

Planning of the objectives of the sensitization and recruitment strategy

With the information obtained from the initial profile assessment, we are in the position to identify the objective we wish to attain. In general terms, it is considered that the recruitment strategy must reach a very diverse range



of family profiles. It is well known that certain types of families (willing to foster a specific profile of children) are easier to recruit than others. For example, it is more complicated to find families that will foster adolescents, children with health problems, disabilities or groups of siblings. However, emergency programs, which assist essentially small children between 0 and 3 years old, seem to function quite successfully in some autonomous communities (Del Valle, Bravo and López, 2009). In this regard, it is expected that not all foster carers will be recruited in the same manner or with the same strategy, thus a plan is required to determine what type of foster carers are needed and where these can be found. It is common, therefore, for the main objective of the recruitment strategy to vary throughout the years as a function of the changes in the profiles of children in the system (hence, the importance of their continuous assessment, as has been indicated in the previous section).

On the other hand, the objective cannot focus exclusively on the recruitment of Foster families. Given the great scarcity of a fostering culture in Spain, it is necessary to carry out intense work in the social promotion of fostering. International studies suggest that the public image of fostering can discourage potential Foster parents to join a Foster program (Jarmon, Mathieson, Clarke, McCulloch and Lazear, 2000). The situation in Spain is even more complex as most people do not have an adequate idea of what fostering entails, there is no clear distinction between foster care and adoption and moreover, certain polemic cases attract great attention in the mass media. Hence, the objective of social sensitization must be a priority in the design of the strategy.

Identification of the methods that have been successful in the recruitment of foster families

Before beginning to plan the strategy, it is pertinent to review how past recruitment campaigns have been conducted, including the materials used, chronograms, key places and available statistics. It is useful to have certain information regarding the phone calls of potential Foster carers that have been received on other occasions; registering these enquiries permits us to identify tendencies, know the previous information that the families have on arrival, and determine if there are biases in their general concept of foster care (Clarke, 2010). Monitorization of consultations (or the systematic registry of certain variables for their posterior analysis) also

allows us to determine if the calls can be associated with intervention, and therefore, if the campaign is being successful. For this reason, it is convenient to conduct a brief survey of all the people who call to obtain information; especially regarding how they found out about the existence of the program or what their motivations for calling are.

At the same time, it is essential to understand that the individual who decides to Foster does not do so suddenly after viewing an advertisement; such an important decision is usually a response to a long reflexive process. In the United Kingdom, during 2006 and 2007, The Fostering Network carried out a study entitled "*Why do people enquire but don't proceed?*" (Clarke, 2007) with the objective of knowing why people make a first enquiry but do not continue the process. The investigation, which had a sample of more than 800 people, revealed that 50% of the families that had thought about fostering between 2004 - 2006 continued to do so in 2007 although they did not feel ready to take the next step. In his study about the intention to Foster, Clarke (2007) found that two-thirds of Foster carers had taken at least a year to think about fostering before contacting the program; Triseliotis and colleagues (1999) found that 80% of initial enquiries do not evolve toward an application; Pasztor and Wynne (1995) observed that the foster carers who decided to call had been thinking about the idea for at least a year and had received messages regarding foster care on at least three or four occasions.

Therefore, it seems that people respond better after the continuous reminders that Foster families are needed (after the trickle-down effect produced by different campaigns). Thus, it is also useful to learn how a family begins to think about fostering, why, and how much time goes by until they contact the program or what the final motivation is that determines this step.

All this information can also be obtained through interviews with current foster carers. Throughout the interviews or discussion groups, it is important to detect the more competent foster carers who would be willing to actively commit to the recruitment and sensitization strategy. Along these lines, some European recruitment programs have used advice from Foster-care counselors as a kind of advisory body. The involvement of Foster carers increases the possibilities of success as it relies on people who have been previously recruited and facilitates the commitment of the Foster carers in the search of new Foster families (Lowe, 1990).



Likewise, it may be interesting to contact the Foster carers who decided not to continue collaborating with the program or those who did not pass the initial informative stage. Even knowing the motives of those who would never think about fostering can help us to understand the social image of foster care and to detect the erroneous conceptions about this measure. All of this contributes to recognizing which messages should be removed from the divulgation material for our program.

Implementation of the most adequate strategies

The method most used for attracting potential Foster carers has been the use of advertisements in newspapers, radio, television, cinema, buses, marquees or billboards. These methods have been recognized as successful with a view to generating enquiries and interest regarding the foster care programs (Lawrence, 1994). Posters and leaflets are usually distributed in different key settings of the community as it has been proven that successful Foster care programs are those that manage to build relationships with multiple groups of the community (General Accounting Office, 1989).

Nevertheless, many investigations emphasize the so-called *mouth to mouth* as the recruitment strategy par excellence (Clarke, 2006; McHugh, McNab, Smyth, Chalmers, Siminski and Saunders, 2004; Triseliotis, Borland and Hill, 2000).

THE FOSTER CARERS' POTENTIAL

We are referring here to the expansive effect that the experience of fostering has in itself; the comments made by families with Foster children to their relatives, neighbors, friends, at work, at school, etc. Logically, *mouth to mouth* only works when the experience is essentially positive and when they are encouraged to transmit it to other people; however, it is possible that when the experience is negative (for example, due to lack of support or clarity in the process) the effect produced would be the opposite.

One of the most significant findings of the research study by Tyebjee (2003) is that people who personally know someone who has been fostered or adopted show a more positive view of both measures. For the author, this fact supports the pertinence of using testimonies of Foster carers in the recruitment of families.

Professionals can unfold a series of tools to support the mouth to mouth of Foster carers, such as for example informing them of the sensitization and recruitment

strategies (getting them to form part of the campaigns), sending them the most up-to-date promotional materials, encouraging them to participate in informative sessions regarding fostering in different contexts of which they are a part, offering them incentives for recruiting new foster carers, or encouraging them to share their stories with the media.

In any case, it is essential that the carers become involved in the recruitment and sensitization strategies (McHugh et al., 2004), as well as in the training and support of foster families that are starting their journey (Pasztor and Burgess, 1982; Jarmon et al., 2000). Likewise, the families who are currently fostering can help us reach certain community sectors more easily: educational contexts, religious organizations, businesses where they work or associations they belong to, etc. (Clarke, 2010).

Certain programs have even employed economic incentives for veteran Foster carers who were capable of recruiting new foster carers. In the North American foster care program assessed by Smith and Gutheil (1988), an incentive of 100 dollars was offered. The results of the assessment showed a 49% increase in the number of recruited families.

Some programs also involve the foster carers in the mapping of the community sectors that may be useful in the campaign promotion (areas where there is a need to find more families or key places where to spread the publicity). The foster carers give advice about the radio stations and newspapers they listen to and read; they can even receive specific information on how to perform their recruitment task, communicate with the press, give talks, etc. being rewarded for it.

Developing connections with organizations in the community can have a multiplying effect of the sensitization and recruitment strategy. The current foster carers can belong to diverse associations or entities that can be of great help in the spreading of the foster care program. Before initiating the strategy, it is convenient to dedicate some time to learning about the community resources that can be useful in the recruitment and to which training sessions, presentations or simply written information (posters, leaflets, etc.) can be offered. In addition to getting the foster families involved in the recruitment strategies, it is necessary to search for inspiring stories that can appear in the media and that will counteract the negative image that the general population has of foster care on some occasions.

Interviews of foster carers in the media can offer a much more realistic and familiar view of what fostering entails. In addition, for foster carers, the fact of sharing their experiences reminds them of why they got involved in the foster care program and reinforces their role.

THE MASS MEDIA

Following what has been said previously, the need to involve the mass media in the recruitment and sensitization strategies can be deduced. Local and regional press can be good allies in conveying the need for foster families to the general population. Although the use of the media on occasion can be fairly costly, we should not forget that there are some ways to achieve a costless diffusion, such as facilitating well elaborated press conferences, writing letters to the director or organizing previous informative events for the press in order to achieve good media coverage.

On the whole, it is convenient to strive for foster care to be present in the media with regularity, through the accounts of foster carers' positive experiences or even events to show gratitude and reward foster families for their dedication. In this regard, there are many European foster programs that conduct galas to honor foster carers who have important trajectories in the system.

MARKETING

Another widely used strategy in recruitment campaigns is what is known as direct marketing. The most common variety is mailing, for which the campaign managers send messages to all potential foster carers in a certain zone, usually chosen from a database. Another type of marketing is direct-mail advertising that consists of introducing information regarding foster care directly into the mailboxes. It is also possible to send direct marketing messages through the Internet.

When a direct marketing strategy is initiated, several key points must be considered (Clarke, 2010): the message should be clear and concise; the materials must be attractive; the official logos should be easily identifiable in order to generate confidence; and the message should be as personalized as possible (directed at specific groups). Pasztor and Burgess (1982) hold that the most adequate recruitment messages are those that reproduce a positive idea of the foster-carer role and emphasize the idea of working as a team with all the professionals involved in the measure. In the phase of message design, it is important to consider that those

messages that describe situations of "rescuing abandoned children" may attract people with motivations that are incompatible with foster care.

THE NET

The possibilities of using the Internet as a resource for diffusion should not be ignored. Around 60% of Spanish families have access to the Internet in their homes. Thus, any sensitization and recruitment campaign should have an updated web page with information about the fostering process, requirements, profiles, and contact information. The information online regarding foster care should be complemented with good levels of usability, a pleasing appearance, photographs of foster placements, etc.

In the same way, blogs or social networks have enormous potential for sharing information about foster care. Some programs have created blogs for foster carers where they talk about their daily educational work. Undoubtedly, these foster carers must be specially trained.

All in all, the different publicity methods have their strengths and weaknesses. A poster on a marquee can be a good way of conveying an attractive image of foster care, but an article in a newspaper can introduce us more deeply into the complexities and challenges that fostering entails. It is essential to learn how to complement all available strategies and employ them in function of the specific objective.

Management of first contacts with potential foster carers

When a potential foster carer decides to take the step of calling to ask for more information, it is very probable that he/she does not have a clear idea of whether he/she will continue with the process. A mixture of feelings and expectations are characteristic of these first contacts (Hoffman, 1998); hence, it is fundamental that the person who takes care of the first assistance is especially sensitive and has received specific training. In this regard, Clarke (2007) holds that the aspect most valued by a family in these first moments is the type of contact, the quality of the information received, and the treatment received by program's personnel. It must be also taken into account that from this first contact the person will form an idea regarding the foster care program based on the information received and the person who assisted them. All this will influence the decision to continue with the process or to abandon it (Clarke, 2007).

The importance of the first contacts has been shown by Keogh and Stvensson (1999), who conducted a follow-up of 91 people who had received information regarding foster care. Of the 96% of people who chose not to foster a child, half of these alleged personal motives and the other half said that they were discouraged by the answer received when they contacted the program. The Fostering Network (Clarke, 2007) has emphasized a series of factors that influence the positive experience during a first informative contact: a) being able to talk to a kind, well-informed person (not an automated telephone system); b) knowing who the person is on the other side of the phone (name and position within the foster care program); c) receiving a correct explanation of why the foster care program needs to know certain data regarding his/her family and what is going to be done with that information; d) being assisted by a person with good communication skills and who allows him/her to ask all the questions that may arise; e) receiving a clear exposition of the steps that he/she will have to follow if he/she decides to foster; and f) letting him/her know that his/her call is very much appreciated and that he/she will be contacted when he/she receives the information at home.

It is important to supply the interested potential foster carers with a way of keeping in touch with the program, making sure that the contact information is the same in every publicity form used. It is also positive that the person who offers the first information to the family is available for future clarifications.

The persons in charge of receiving the calls must be very clear about the requisites that will be demanded of the families, and show consistency of criteria. If in the first enquiry call someone is going to be rejected, the motive must be clearly stated and also if he/she has any possibilities of becoming a foster carer in the future in case his/her circumstances change.

Monitorization and strategy assessment

Foster care programs require the use of instruments that permit the assessment of the progress and success of the interventions. The assessment must be a continuous process and an essential part of the family-recruitment strategy, as we need to know how it has functioned, in qualitative and quantitative terms. In any case, a lot of caution is required when interpreting the results of the recruitment strategies, given that it is considered that a program does not usually obtain results until after 12 months have passed from the implementation date of the

campaign. The results of the strategy can be assessed three years after its implementation.

CONCLUSIONS

The international literature on foster family recruitment suggests that successful recruitment programs are those that are directed at the whole community, involve veteran foster carers in their interventions, employ all available means and send realistic messages of what fostering entails. The experts equally emphasize the necessity of assuming yearly recruitment and sensitization plans, of creating adequate spaces for the recognition and gratification of foster families from the administration and of relying on assessment systems of the obtained achievements. This last issue becomes especially important; it is necessary to develop a body of information regarding how the campaigns function in our context and which interventions are more successful. Experience tells us that certain programs have been capable of creating a good bank of foster families, but without rigorous evaluations we cannot determine what the ingredients of success have been, and therefore, we cannot transfer these to other programs.

In the last few years, professionals of foster care entities have detected a greater number of foster care proposals for children between 0 and 3, which has been related to an increase in child abandonment (López, Del Valle, Montserrat and Bravo, 2010). It is evident that if the necessary strategies to strengthen the foster care programs are not developed, the protection system will be forced to continue to depend on institutional care for a great number of children.

The administrations and program managers are beginning to be convinced of this, and as has been shown throughout this article, we already have certain empirical evidence regarding what works in those countries where foster care has a solid tradition. The professionals who are dedicated to family recruitment can only gather energy and get used to the idea that they are facing a long-distance race where rewards may come very slowly after intense collaborative work among the different professionals involved and the foster families.

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