

## Parte terza

I problemi del presente:  
letture e interpretazioni socio-pedagogiche



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*Is the State a Good Parent? - Challenges of education and care in the Hungarian child protection system*

ABSTRACT

The research is called *Is the State a Good Parent?* since it studies the principles and professional conceptions determining practical work in the field of corporate parenting. The state can be a good parent if it is able to assume responsibility for the children in care, to satisfy their individual needs, and to make every effort so that they have good results in school and in other fields of life, as any responsible parents would wish for their own children. Successful school graduation is needed to promote children's social inclusion and to improve their position in the labour-market, which cannot be achieved without support. Based on the results of the qualitative elements of my research, I will reflect on issues that point to necessary changes within the child protection system to ensure professionalism in the long term.

KEYWORDS: Hungarian child protection, educational support carrier, corporate parenting

*Introduction*

The mainstream child protection includes corporate parental involvement as an opportunity, as well as an obligation, to provide good future for children and young adults in care, compared to their counterparts in families. The state will be considered a good parent if it is able to take responsibility for the children in care, to meet their individual needs, and if it strives to promote them so that they achieve equally good results at school and in other areas of life, as any responsible parents would wish for their own children. Good parenting for young adults means the preparation for an independent, own life by providing the appropriate level of educational participation and labour market integration. The same expectations

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apply (Scottish Government, 2008; Corporate parenting strategy for Clackmannanshire, 2009-2012; Parent & child fostering scheme procedures, 2010-2013) to the foster parents as members of the public child care in providing home.

The following analysis describes the most important results of the qualitative phase of the research *Is the state a good parent?*<sup>2</sup>, which relate to satisfying children's needs and to the dynamics and character of planning. The research includes four individual interviews and three focus group interviews. The groups are organized according to three criteria, i.e. maintainers (government, church, civil maintenance), exploration of possible differences concerning the dominant treatment type for a deeper understanding of the characteristics of each model (foster care, children's homes dominance), and problem focuses. A child welfare professional was invited into the maintainers' focus group to explore coordination in cooperation. There was one group in Budapest and two in Debrecen, addressing professionals of Hajdú-Bihar County. In addition, with the permission of the Hungarian Association of FICE, the delegates of the XV Children's Parliament were asked whether the state was a good parent. Therefore, we will present the views of professionals and child parliamentarians, and discuss the importance of career education support in terms of social integration. The system-wide development of child protection is conceptually bound to the theory of change.

### *Some trends of specialized care*

As for the trends of child protection, apparently, the number of minors decreased between 2000-2008, while the number of adolescents grew. The number of minors showed a rise again from 2011 and exceeded 18 thousand. According to the data of the Central Statistical Office (2014), in 2013, 18,674 underage persons (children and

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<sup>2</sup>The University of Debrecen, Sociology and Social Policy Department of the University financed the research between June 30 and 1 July 2013. The survey (registration number: RH/885/2013) was built on quantitative and qualitative methods, designed generally to explore the principles and professional concepts defining the practical work relevant to corporate parenthood care and responsibility-taking. The quantitative research phase included an online questionnaire sent to the maintainers, which typically asked for attitude issues and to define child protection concepts and terminology.

youths) grew up in the care system. 63.8% of them lived with foster parents (11,918 people).

The role of the two main care forms changed, so that between 1997-2000 the institutional care was dominant, and between 2001-2003 minors were placed 50-50% in institutional and foster care. The shift towards foster care began in 2004, yet, a significant increase can be detected from 2010. In that year, the number of places in children's homes was 9241, almost 30% of this was in general children's homes, and the same proportion in residential care homes (30.5%), whereas the ratio was 5.7% in special children's homes and residential home. The ratio of places in special children's homes and residential homes was 21% (CSO, 2014). Both foster care and institutional care are the most extensive in Budapest and Pest County, Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Counties. 26.5% of the foster care networks exists in the Northern Great Plain (Alföld), and 17% in the capital. Also significant is the Southern Great Plain region, where 16.4% of networks operate (CSO, 2014).

### *Examination of need-satisfaction functions of the state's child protection*

Interviewees believe that the practical application of child protection principles and available decision-making mechanisms by regulations do not happen often in real life situations as systematic procedures, but only as ad hoc procedures, subordinated to the prevailing conditions and supplemented by possible intervention according to the actual knowledge and attitudes of the professional, who uses a system-wide process.

Many interviewees identify anomalies in the cooperation between primary and specialized cares as system problems, which can be traced back to the shortcomings in communication and linking procedure-order of the two-part system. The full realization of the professional principles is barred by the non-existent elaborated protocols, and the non-incorporated existent protocols.

«The collaboration between primary care and specialized care varies. It greatly depends on the institutions obliged to cooperate, on institutional culture, the personality of experts, their professional preparedness. [...] Today we can say that they see

each other's activities, but there is still such a belief in the specialized care that child welfare only appears when a review takes place. At the same time I often meet this kind of blaming opinion in specialized care. A sense of distrust exists in child welfare and specialized care. As if they felt at times unsure whether specialized care will be a good place for children, wherein certain stereotypes and prejudices obviously play a role, because specialized care was so completely different before 1997 than it is now»<sup>3</sup>.

Even the core concept, 'vulnerability', to remove a child from the family, is not a professionally well-defined system element, which inhibits professional and reliable process management. The fulfillment of the undertaken tasks of specialized care requires the future development of primary care. After removing a child from family, evidently, the blood family almost completely disappears from the sight of the child welfare. The extraordinary workload does not allow that, in addition to the cases in the concrete and direct threat, they also get resource to assist the reunification of broken families, that is, to create the necessary conditions for successful home care.

In relation to child care or institutional placement, child protection professionals have also drawn attention to more theoretical and practical dilemmas. Approaching from the removal and placement procedures, the first highlighted neuralgic point is the temporal indeterminacy of placement and generally removal, that is uncertainty, which causes a problem in connection with the permanency of the changed life situation for both the removed child and the host medium (mainly in foster care placement). The removal is temporary according to both legal will and child protection principles. This leads to an irresolvable contradiction in the case of foster care placement for the best reception, whether the guiding principle is to decide for development and strengthening of the personal ties, or, conversely, for the preparation to quickly reinstate the child to home care, when abstaining from forming deeper ties is appropriate. As concerns this dilemma, the possibility to reinstate to home care has a much broader scale in daily operation, and at the same time it can be better forecast than in the theoretical approach.

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<sup>3</sup> Source: expert of child protection, individual interview. Own translation.

«[...] this situation is full of failure, because I cannot imagine a situation when someone is added into my family, and I have to work on not to love him/her, that s/he should not love me, or I have to work on that s/he should love me. [...] I think it is quite evident when a person is placed in specialized child care, whether there is a real chance to get back into the blood family. [...] So, I think the profession should be much more responsible in this matter. [...] Quite differently could the natural parent adapt to this situation as well as the foster parents, let alone the children themselves, if the situation was clear»<sup>4</sup>.

Examining foster care and institutional care, all the professionals interviewed take the most important starting point in that the two sub-systems should not be contrasted with each other even when comparing, assessing their operational characteristics or their efficiency, they have to be interpreted as complementary care forms, as substitute services for a family. They consider it a specifically false conception that either form of care should have over-dominance, and they agree that the application of certain guidelines and setting priorities (for example, the guiding principle for foster placement of the youngest age group) are necessary, but in their practical application, the actual real-life situations should be reflected more than in the current practice. They believe that the profession should be more clearly and precisely able to formulate the benefits and drawbacks resulting from the characteristics of these two care forms and the profession should be able to treat those as a means. While the form of institutional care has institutional, alienating nature providing a less familiar environment, nevertheless it is true and equally important that the availability of support in this form of professional care has a much higher quality. It is also important that, due to the basic situation of the integrational context of a real family, the success of foster care is much more dependent on the participants, that is, the personal relations of the foster parent, the child and other members of the foster family, which facilitates not only a more homely upbringing environment, but requires more criteria to be considered in the placement and adjustment.

«Since the foster parents allow the children into their lives, they should have the choice to say no. They are people, not machines. Consequently, there will be a lot of kids, whom none of the

<sup>4</sup> Source: expert of child protection, individual interview. Own translation.

foster parents would want to take, and this must be absolutely respected and maintainable. It is pointless that foster parents take a child because the maintainers in the network say that, if they do not, they cannot continue as foster parents. We already know what constraints exist for foster parents to want to stay at any price. [...] Where a tremendous scale of unemployment reigns, there foster parenting is actually a job opportunity»<sup>5</sup>.

It is important to see that the function and system requirements of foster parent care and child home care cannot be the same. The institutional form of care is appropriate for those children who may be reinstated into their own family soon, as well as for those 14-17 year olds whose professional support aims primarily to gain the knowledge necessary for social inclusion, to acquire skills for independent living, or for those children who have neurotic, psychotic, dissociative symptoms and deviant behavior, whose development and treatment are only possible in an institutional framework. Institutional care is able to take care for those who have moderate and severe disabilities, or are acute patients in need of care and treatment. Unfortunately in the practice there aren't extended special tools, methods and programs for these target groups. Also do the siblings, when 4-5-6-7 siblings are placed in the care system at the same time (Joshua, 2005; Vidra Szabó, 2000).

During the placement procedure, according to experts interviewed, when the most appropriate place for children's needs in the care system is determined, typically the available places determine the committee of experts' proposal, rather than the children's real needs. Apparently, financially motivated decisions override the child's real interests in the selection of a placement with appropriate content capacity, as well as in the case of choosing between foster care or institutional care forms, when the experts in the decision-making process treat the fundamental fact that foster care is significantly cheaper as a high priority argument.

Experts point out that unfortunately, today's operation of the child protection system is typically an ad-hoc decision-making process clearly determined by underfunding in the background. The 1997 conversion, that is, the replacement of large institutions as the turning point in the re-organization of the system, was a process in which no or insufficient financial resources were available (Vidra Szabó, 2000).

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<sup>5</sup> Source: professional in child protection, leader of an apartment home, focus-group Hajdu-Bihar county. Own translation.

The apartment home structure brought system-wide risks into the structure, which mostly manifests in its extremely resource-intensive operation. Compared to the mass placement, the apartment home that typically works in small settlements with few persons poses new types of challenges for children and professionals. Therefore, the professionals are not able to provide appropriate support for the children in their trust, as there is a lack of targeted training for suitable skills to manage the new situation.

«The children tell us that they simply run away from the apartment home because they cannot handle freedom and few people. They were used to a large institution where they would certainly find links and cannot cope with the need to find a position among 8-10-12 children. All children have indicated that they feel lonely. [...] they cannot cope with the situation wherein they should find a place in a 500-person village from one day to the next. Thus, neither child, nor adult has been prepared, and adults express the same»<sup>6</sup>.

Interviewed experts believe that the development of foster networks against the apartment home structure is not an appropriate response to the problem in its current form. The measure, the intensity of development is clearly exaggerated in the light of short time for conversion, and secondly, as past experience has shown, the apartment home care model may not be suitable in all respects to replace the former institutional structure. Thus, the development of a dominant foster parents network cannot be a good decision. The most recent initiative in which a foster care network operates in line with a children's home can be a start for a very positive formation. This type of cooperation has been implemented in the civil and ecclesiastical operations, and its development would be highly desirable throughout the system.

### *Support for Educational Participation*

Supporting educational achievement is not easy in long-term child protection care. Children's motivation towards school is very poor. It

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<sup>6</sup> Source: professional in child protection, educator in a children home, focus-group Hajdu-Bihar county. Own translation.

is more typical when a child has lived in his/her multiple disadvantaged family for a long time. The lack of motivation is closely related to the low educational level of adults and social disadvantages. Even the children's parents do not consider learning important and school attainment as the possible way of social elevation. In order to promote their social inclusion and improve their position in the labour market, they need finishing school successfully and acquiring professions, and it cannot be achieved without increasing support. In long-term child protection care relating to caring-rearing activities, a continuous knowledge transmission is accompanied by communication and development of the children's verbal skills. Conscious attention should be paid to it. Talking amply to children who enter long-term care is vital, in accordance with their age. Tale-telling, poetry activities, singing together, puppetry and role-playing should become a part of small children's everyday lives, while youngsters appreciate drama pedagogy techniques (RÁCZ, 2015; Farkas *et al.*, 2015).

According to the OSAP (national statistical data collection programme) data for the year 2011, we can conclude that a larger proportion of children between 15-17 living in foster care, engage in secondary education: 86% of them study, differently from the children who live in children's home, where it is only 61,1%. There is a significant difference between the two forms of care regarding the engagement in education that ends with leaving certificate (secondary school or vocational secondary school), which later becomes determinant in terms of positioning in labour market and social integration. 54,3% of this age group living in children's home study in secondary vocational school or vocational school, and only 10,3% of them continue their studies in school that ends with maturation certificate. In foster care, 31,7% of the children study at a school that ends with a leaving certificate and 50,9% in vocational training school (Papházi 2014: 187). However, it is important to mention that the number of children participating in education that provides maturation certification has been increasing slowly, from 22% in 2002 to 25% in 2011 (KSH 2012: 10). Educational level is an indicator for social integration of those who are adult age and leave the system. Every second young adult aged 18-25 leaving the system, finishes elementary school. In 2011, in the case of young adults who left the system, it was nearly 40%. In 2011, 56,3%

of those who left the system had secondary and 3,2% of them had higher education qualification (KSH 2012: 12).

Table 1 – *Educational carrier in after care provision in 2014*<sup>7</sup>

Type of school	Those who are in after care provision (N)
Not finished elementary school	98
Finished elementary school	1,886
Finished secondary school	932
From this: finished high school ( <i>gimnázium</i> )	226
From this: finished vocational secondary school ( <i>Szakközépiskola</i> )	265
From this: finished vocational training school ( <i>Szakiskola</i> )	441
From this: finished special vocational training school ( <i>Speciális szakiskola</i> )	118
Finished higher education	36
From this: MA	7
From this: BA	15
From this: other higher education	14

Overcoming disadvantages at school requires complex, special skills, starting from scratch, and an assumed good educator-child relationship. Therefore, it is important to structure the preparation properly, to fulfil objective and subjective conditions of learning (suitable environment, preparation of learning tools, clarifying motivation and problems). During planning learning, individual characteristics should be taken into account. Developing individual learning techniques, learning self-check gradually, increasing self-confidence should be the objectives. Developing children's individual skills, recognising and facilitating their talents contribute to the development of their personality. It should be a customized achievement in this organised framework. Conscious talent support, personal skill development have positive effect on the individual's personality development as a whole. Further education plans and realistic opportunities should be talked

<sup>7</sup> Hungarian Central Statistical Office, unpublished data, by the Ministry of Human Resources.

over with the child in the last years of elementary school and with the engagement of parents if possible (RÁCZ, 2015; Farkas *et al.*, 2015).

### *Youths' Opinion on the State undertaking parenthood*

The XV Child Parliament had 35 delegates, all responded by writing whether the state was a good parent and they justified their response as well. 14 from 35 young people feel that the state is not considered a good parent, 11 people feel it partly good and partly bad, 8 of them consider the state a clearly good parent, and two youths are not able to judge it.

According to the positive beliefs, the state's parental involvement satisfies those in care, their needs, providing clothes, accommodation, social security, schooling, talent development and remedial programs, and plays a family substitute role. «The state tries everything so that we, disadvantaged young people should not suffer shortage of anything»<sup>8</sup>.

The negative opinions refer to a number of system shortcomings. The majority of young people believes that the system is not adapted to the individual needs and that it ignores individual wants, desires, and plans for the future. Children and young people often receive unjust treatment, for example, they are not reared with their siblings. They believe that the system is not fair, it distinguishes between those in care, and what they can achieve in the upbringing of the child protection system depends on the individual professionals. There are great differences in the financial possibilities of the institutions and foster parents, for example, in support for study or in the organization of free time (RÁCZ, 2012; RÁCZ-Korintus, 2013).

Young people claim that the system cannot fully compensate for the disadvantages, the rules in many cases are unpredictable. Young people highlight that the system is impersonal, that professionals do not seek to learn about the characteristics, capabilities, capacity of those in care, and to adapt these expectations to the system (RÁCZ, 2012). The most negative perception of the state is that it separates the parents from the children in care and is not able to give love to children. «[...] the state is not interested in the fate of people in state care»<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Source: youth in Child parliament.

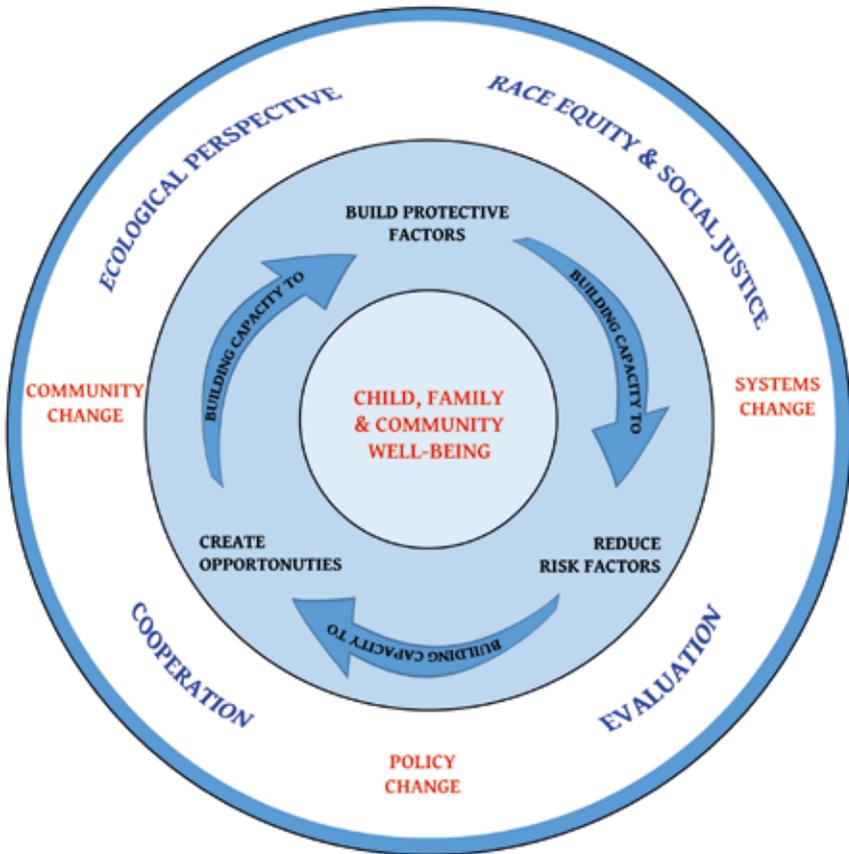
<sup>9</sup> Source: youth in Child parliament.

*Summary*

According to the results of the qualitative research and the child parliamentary delegates, a major problem in the child protection is that professional, substantive changes are mostly due to individual initiatives. There is no quality assurance, efficiency or effectiveness measurement in the current system of specialized care (Herczog, 2001; Szikulai, 2006; Rácz, 2012). Children's needs meet no full satisfaction, capacity planning is arbitrary, service capacity shows significant regional differences, so it is possible that regionally different problems become child protection issues. The system cannot meet the children's special and singular needs, especially in the context of foster care (Rubeus Association, 2013). The professional rules would also be vitally important because they determine what experts need to know, and simultaneously provide what the particular institution / care offer for the children and their blood families. The professional rules in meeting the needs may combine all the conditions, methods, standards and knowledge that child protection professionals are expected to possess (Domszky, 2004). Without these, however, on an emotional basis, some enthusiastic or less self-sacrificing people will determine the practical functioning, and this leads to clear system anomalies, dysfunctional operation, and, instead of protecting, to damaging children's rights. The state can only substitute the role of the family, and interviewed experts and young people claim that the state cannot be a good parent, unless it makes the professionals perform parental duties as good parents, that is, unless it enables them to concentrate on their professional work, to be satisfied with their own situation, and to proactively carry out their tasks.

As for the necessary system changes, the interviewed experts mention as a key target that real system-oriented reforms are to be carried out, along with complex interventions including the correlations of the sub-areas, rather than in the framework of separate, isolated, project-based developments, investments, in a kind of tinkering. An important conceptual foundation in line with the prior mission of child protection has been formulated: supporting families should be in focus for a global approach by channelling community resources, and only under its auspices should child protection and child welfare subsystems be considered individually (Trocmé, 1999). Strengthening families may come along with enhancing five interrelated protection

factors by informal and formal support systems in coordination with families with children, such as 1) parental resilience support, which means a positive attitude to children and parenthood, care and appropriate parental reactions in problematic life situations, and stress management; 2) encouraging social relationships that can mobilize the informal help of local resources; 3) parental knowledge about child development and education, adequate, tailored child-rearing and need-satisfaction, to ensure the child's physical, mental, spiritual and moral development, and to compensate for any delays; 4) support in times of crisis, so that they are actively seeking and accepting help for the child and the parent's own interest; 5) the development of the children's social and emotional competencies, positive communication, interactivity, which takes place in a warm family atmosphere (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2005). Support for all these is not only the task of the actors in child welfare and child protection, but also that of the representatives of related professions, such as public education, health, social protection, culture, etc. The ecclesiastical and non-governmental organizations or voluntary associations can have a particular role, but the media should widely display parenthood and children as individuals with rights as social value in the context of educational activities (Bogács *et al.*, 2015).

Figure 1 - *The theory of change in order to support families*

(Source: Browne, 2014: 5th)

The theory of change (Figure 1) directs attention to that. Child's, family's and community's well-being involves not only engineering protective factors, but it simultaneously means a reduction of risk factors, as well as creating opportunities for families with children to enable realizing their potential (on individual and family level) to satisfy their needs. All this requires a system-level change, which may be achieved in a stable political, economic and cultural environment,

wherein co-operation, social justice and equality, as well as analyzing the impacts, are core values (Brown, 2014).

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