

Identification of Benefits and Risks of Professional Parenthood

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Abstract:

Objective: The authors show the results from the qualitative study conducted in 2015. The partial objective was to identify benefits and risks of professional parenthood from the point of view of professional parents in the Slovak Republic.

Participants: The sample included nine professional parents (n=9) including seven professional mothers and two professional fathers, aged from 32 to 53 years.

Methods: The data were collected by in-depth semi-structured interviews that were transcribed and analysed.

Results: Besides the declared benefits of professional parenthood (the possibility to influence development of children towards responsibility and independence), all professional parents talked about exhaustion, a total loss of privacy, and

problems related to contacts between a child with his biological family as serious risks of care.

Conclusion: The job position of a professional parent in the labour market is, in fact, a new job position whose certain parts are not regulated, e.g. taking a leave of absence, taking a sick leave, and rapidly increasing burnout syndrome in the workers; therefore, it is necessary to deal with these issues and seek solutions.

Keywords: Professional parenthood. Institutional care. Benefits of professional parenthood. Risks of professional parenthood.

Introduction

Substitute care and professional parenthood as its specific part grow in importance if the society accepts the fact

that a child would have an opportunity to grow up in a family which provides him space for his individual development, and leads him to independence, creativity and responsibility for his life. As Minarovičová states (2015, p. 6): "Adequate fulfillment of children's needs is at the same time a prerequisite for their healthy personal development, which is an assumption for their future application in human relations as well as in meeting the requirements of life in its various phases."

In the Slovak Republic, professional parenthood has been legally implemented since 1993, but it has been applied in practice since 1996. As a specific form of institutional care, it minimizes negative effects of institutional care, e.g. mental deprivation, and provides environment which approximates family stable environment by its signs and thus positively influences physical and mental development of children, their abilities and skills, and their work habits.

1 Professional Parenthood

Professional parenthood as a specific institute of institutional care is defined as care in home environment of a children's home's employee – a professional parent. It can be a family house or flat whose owner, co-owner or tenant is a professional parent, or a home that is provided by a children's home (Profesionálne rodiny,

2016). The aim of the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic is to gradually increase the number of children placed in professional families so that, after removal from their biological families, they do not have to spend time in facilities such as children's homes. Since 2012, all children up to the age of six years must be placed in professional families (Tlačová správa ÚPSVaR, 2011).

Table 1: Number of professional families from 2008 to 2015

Year	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5
Number of professional families								
	3	4	5	5	6	6	6	6
	6	8	6	8	2	6	8	6
	2	3	3	9	9	7	3	9

(The data recorded by 31 December of each year, except 2008 when recorded by 31 August)

(Source: Ročné výkazy V05 MPSVR SR o poskytovaní starostlivosti a ...)

The increase in number of professional families shows current trends and

tendencies of the position of children's homes as service and support centres for professional parents. On 31 December 2015, there were 4,622 children placed in children's homes, including 1,453 children placed in professional families (Ročné výkazy V05 MPSVR SR o poskytovaní starostlivosti, 2016).

The roles of professional parents include meeting psychological, physical and social needs of children (to accept a child in their family unconditionally, heal or alleviate consequences of trauma resulting from abandonment, to re-saturate their neglected developmental needs, to help children revise their negative experiences, and to enhance their self-esteem and hope for the future) and performing the duties resulting from the work and legal relation with a children's home whose employees they are (Metodické usmernenie vykonávania ..., 2011).

Besides the unquestionable advantages, it is also necessary to show the risks of professional substitute care. According to Gabura (2012), the highest risks of professional parenthood are temporality of the relationship, building a relationship between professional parents and a child and termination of the relationship if the biological family's problems are solved or if a stable substitute family is interested in a child. Emotional attachment develops between a parent and a child who is in a

professional family for a longer period of time and it can cause difficulties in future interaction with potential foster parents or adoptive parents. There were cases when it was necessary to remove a child from a professional family and place him back to a children's home to avoid contacts with a professional parent; otherwise, interaction with applicants would have been unsuccessful. Particularly for small children it is difficult to cope with separation from a person who they spend time with 24/7. Contacts between professional parents and older children are complicated by multiple factors such as a defence mechanism that hinders them from spontaneous establishment of a relationship with the adults. Many children lost trust in the adults who disappointed them repeatedly (Hrušková, Gambošová, 2011). The question also is if it is suitable to place children in foster care of professional parents who remain employed as professional parents and provide care for other children from children's home. A child does not understand why children who are in foster care are with them permanently, call them mother and father, why they have to go to a children's home and those children stay in the family. Disputable is also the issue of professional parents' leave of absence and relating return of a child to children's home and his stay there. Many children's homes deal

with the situation by placing children to other professional families to prevent children from returning to children's home environment, particularly in case of younger children (Gažíková, 2014).

2 Study on Benefits and Risks of Professional Parenthood

In 2015 we conducted a qualitative study whose main objective was *identification of benefits and risks of care for children in professional families*. As several authors (e.g.: Hejdiš, Škoviera, Filadelfiová, etc.) address this issue, we were able to compare our results and work on this issue from the perspective of professional parents. Most of the studies focus on analysis and description of benefits and risks of professional families from the point of view of children. That's why we decided to focus on problems of professional parents.

Sample

The study sample consisted of professional parents which was also our basic inclusion criterion. As a sampling method we used a combination of casual and intentional sampling through an institution – we contacted children's homes that we had cooperated with for a longer period of time. After confirmations of interest to participate in our study from children's

homes, we contacted professional parents working in the children's homes. There were nine professional parents in the study, including seven professional mothers and two professional fathers aged from 32 to 53 years who worked for the children's home Koliňany and the children's home Žitavce.

Table 2: Sample

Partici pant no.	A ge	Childr en's home	Years of experi ence	Numbe r of childre n in the professi onal family
1	34	Žitavce	6	3
2	32	Žitavce	9	3
3	53	Koliň ny	4	3
4	32	Žitavce	3	2
5	46	Koliň ny	2	2
6	32	Žitavce	1	2
7	40	Žitavce	4	2
8	49	Žitavce	4	3
9	51	Žitavce	7	3

(Source: Jurenková, Gažíková, 2015)

Methods

To collect data, we used the method of a semi-structured interview that is a flexible

way of collecting opinions and experiences of participants – in our case professional parents. The interviews, which were conducted directly in the families of the professional parents, were recorded on the dictating machine, which provided us with a greater space for talking, followed up by transcription and recording of the results. The participants were explained the purpose of recording and were asked if they agreed with it. During the interviews, we also made notes; we recorded the place, name and age of the participants, how many children they had in professional care, and how long they had worked as professional parents.

The basic method for analysis of the data was content analysis as a more extensive spectrum of methods and ways that are used for analysis of collected data to explain meaning, define a structure, and identify stylistic and syntactic particularities. The data were categorized; we developed induced categories for them – the indicators, and frequency of repeated answers. In data analysis, we grouped similar concepts as tens, even hundreds expressions are used by participants. This process of clustering is called categorization. Labelling of a category should have the most logical relevance with the data it represents (Strauss, Corbinová, 1999).

2.1 Results

The issue of professional parenthood has been spread widely but even despite the legislation, professional parents still face multiple problems, the identified risks in our case. Professional families enable children to grow up in the family system; thus, they can see how the system works, what its members' roles are, or what rules they follow. In the Table 3, we present a summary of the results on the identified benefits of professional parenthood for children and professional parents as children's homes' employees.

Table 3: Benefits of professional parenthood

	Category description	Induced category	Absolute frequency
1	Work performed in professional family's home environment, independence	Work from home	13
	Desire to work with children	Opportunity for self-realization	15

	even without pedagogical or other education, desire to help children	in professional field	
2	Opportunity of individual preparation for child's independence	Child's preparation for adulthood	4
	Child benefits and meeting their needs	Financial support for children	2
3	Including other professional family members in upbringing, enhancement of family cohesion	Cooperation of other family members	10
Total number of statements			44

(Source: Jurenková, Gažíková, 2015)

The aim of the open-ended question was to find out what professional parents see as benefits of this form of child care. Out of

the total number (n=44) of statements, we identified five induced categories that were subsequently divided into three areas:

- 1 Benefits for professional parents,
- 2 Benefits for children placed in professional families,
- 3 Benefits for other professional family members (husband, wife, biological children, other relatives).

The highest number of statements was in the category "*Opportunity for self-realization in professional field*" (15). Other large categories were "*Work from home*" (13) and "*Cooperation of other family members*" (10). The lowest numbers of answers were in "*Child's preparation for adulthood*" (4) and "*Financial support for children*" (2).

The aim of other questions was identification of risks of professional parenthood. The total number of answers (n=50) was divided into two areas:

- 1 Risks for professional parents (and other professional family members),
- 2 Risks for children placed in professional families.

Table 4: Risks of professional parenthood

	Category description	Induced category	Absolute frequency
1	Problematic taking of a leave of absence, continuous work, inadequate legislative conditions for taking a leave of absence	Exhaustion of professional parents	14
	Inadequately paid work, salary does not correspond with work performance, absence of bonuses and other benefits	Inadequate salary	13
	Problems in partner relationship of professional parents (quarrels), loss of background, family, friends	Disruption of relationships of professional parents	8

	Adjustment to children's regimen, changes in lifestyle	Loss of privacy	6
2	Problems when children are in contact with their biological families (disappointment, emotional deprivation, health problems), inadequate interest by family	Negative impacts of children's contact with their biological families	9
Total number of statements			50

(Source: Jurenková, Gažíková, 2015)

As the study results show, the participants identified the risk areas particularly as those that related directly to them, their family life, or salaries. The highest numbers of statements were in the categories “*Exhaustion of professional parents*” (14) and “*Inadequate salary*” (13). Other categories were “*Disruption of relationships*” (8), “*Loss of privacy*” (6), and “*Negative impacts of children's contact with their biological families*” (9).

2.2 Discussion

The qualitative study objective was identification of benefits and risks of professional parenthood in the Slovak Republic. The significance of professional families is in the children's opportunity to grow up in a family where role models and space for development of child's individuality are provided.

In a more detailed look at the identified benefits of professional parenthood from a point of view of professional parents, we can see three different areas (*Table 3*):

- 1 Benefits for professional parents,
- 2 Benefits for children placed in professional families,
- 3 Benefits for other professional family members (husband, wife, biological children, other relatives).

The first area directly relates to performance of professional parenthood as a work activity of children's homes' employees. We identified that this form of work suits to most of the participants, which was also one of the motives to become a professional parent. It is particularly *work from home*, i.e. independence from attendance at work. Even though it is continuous work, it is not legally binding – both a parent and a child can freely decide if they want to stay in a relationship or not (Belková, 2011). Furthermore, the participants positively evaluated this work as an *opportunity of*

self-realization in working with children.

Even though many of them did not have pedagogical education, this form of work allows them working with children.

The second area of benefits, which is rather smaller, relates to benefits of professional parenthood for children placed in such families. Most of expert publications and papers focus particularly on this area. The experts declare indisputable benefits and highly positive significance of professional parenthood mainly from the perspective of healthy development of the child. The results in our study also confirm this as the participants stated *child's preparation for independence* as the main goal of care. This form of care takes meeting individual needs of children into account and is similar to the model of family upbringing (Tlačová správa ÚPSVaR, 2011); it also provides models of family roles, and models for building relationships and bonds necessary for independent and responsible life in the future.

The last part focused also on other professional family members – mainly a partner of a professional parent (if only one of the partners was a professional parent), biological children or other biological and extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, acquaintances). An *opportunity to participate in care*, building relationships of other family members with placed

children, and enhancement of family cohesion were clearly declared positives of this care, which can also contribute to better adaptation of children in these families. However, we must remember that professional parenthood is still an employment relation, not a parental relationship, although it occurs in a household. Strong emotional attachment between professional parents and children, and also other family members becomes a big problem, particularly when this care is terminated. Lichner, Bajczerová and Šlosár (2014) state that in the phases of placing a child, his adaptation, and termination of care in a professional family, there is an increased emotional burden for all people involved; therefore, social workers along with other professionals should pay attention to consequences of preparation in these specific phases of care.

Not only adorable children up to six years of age that are easily adoptable get into professional families. Very often disadvantaged children, large groups of children, siblings, handicapped children, Roma children, and older children are involved (Ontková, 2011); they need increased care in comparison with other children. *“Children need continuous care as they are handicapped, they require continuous supervision and I have to take care of them for 24 hours a day”* (all statements by professional parents are

translated by the authors). Such statements by the participants described ***physically and psychologically demanding care*** (the largest category of the identified risks of professional parenthood, *Table 4*). Very often, older children coming to these families have many socially undesirable patterns of behaviour obtained during their stays in children’s homes or original family environment. Exhaustion can be prevented by adequate training for people applying for this job. Professional parents are required to be able to manage care for children of any age with any needs, which is really very demanding. Even if any training including preparation for such multifunctionality existed, it would not work for other family members who were not trained (Ontková, 2011). Trainings for professional performance of substitute care can be taken at any office of labour, social affairs and family, or accredited subjects that have accreditation for providing training for professional performance of substitute care. In the present, training for professional performance of substitute care is provided by the accredited subjects Návrat, o. z. (civic association); Spoločnosť priateľov detí z detských domovov Úsmev ako dar; and Miesto pod slnkom, n. o. (non-profit organisation) (Profesionálne rodiny, 2016).

The ***issue of taking a leave of absence*** belongs to problematic areas of

performance of professional parenthood. When taking a leave of absence, many parents cannot place a child into a children's home, so they have to seek alternative solutions. *"Taking a leave of absence is problematic. Children cannot go to the children's home; we must save money for a children camp or they stay with our colleagues, which I don't consider to be a suitable way of taking a leave of absence. I always pass days of a leave of absence to the next year, and then I take it when children go to another family. It's not legislatively thought through; the law allows it but reality, unfortunately, does not. We cannot throw out children in the street telling them: go somewhere; I'm taking a leave of absence. That's not possible."* Even though employees have a right for a leave of absence in accordance with the Labour Code, the question is how it is exercised by professional parents. When taking a leave of absence, some professional parents temporarily place children in children's homes, children stay with other professional parents from another family, or they pay for children's stay in a children camp or for a curative stay.

Another identified risk was *inadequate salaries* that were described as insufficient related to their job performance. *"We work seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year; and salary does not*

correspond with our work as it is continuous. We don't have time for ourselves; weekends and public holidays are not paid; we have no advantages. In my opinion this job is underfunded and it is not legislatively regulated."

Although professional parents are children's homes' employees, we cannot compare their duties and profession with other employees. A *loss of privacy* and giving up of own intimacy is the reality that includes psychological burden from interpenetration of their household and workplace. Belková (2011) also states that even if the dimension of parenthood dominates, it is not possible to deny the reality of professionalization. Family privacy is also limited by other workers' personal visits and inspections in professional family environment (Matej a kol., 2000). *"When the child came to us, we had to adapt to him and tolerate him, and of course it wasn't easy for him either. Also my own children had to tolerate that I was looking after other children, too, as they had to share their privacy. We used to travel a lot, which is not possible now, because there isn't enough money to go for a holiday with all the children, and that rather limits us."* Often, it can lead to *disruption of relationships* between the husband and wife – professional parents or other family members.

One of the serious risks for a child that professional parents perceive is ***problematic contacts between a child and his biologic family***. The participants identified mainly negative impacts of the contact: a child is disappointed because of a lack of attention and love, which often results in serious health problems. Paradoxically, some authors warn that a big problem in professional parenthood “is the fact that a relationship that develops between a professional parent and a child prevents them from “professional” building of a relationship with a biological family or preparing a child for the next substitute family. If the children’s stay in professional families is to be meaningful and is to help them, it can be hardly expected no relationship is built and developed between them. We can only hardly imagine it would be possible to achieve enhancement in children’s situation, their well-being and often elimination of educational or health problems, if a positive bond – a relationship between a child and a professional parent – did not exist” (Belková, 2011, p. 12; translated by the authors).

Also this can be one of the problems why the participants perceive rather negative impacts of contacts between a child and his biological family. However, blaming them for any unprofessionalism related to

development of emotional bonds is not logical, in our opinion.

Recommendations

A job position of a professional parent in the labour market is, in fact, a new job position whose certain parts are not regulated, e.g. taking a leave of absence, taking a sick leave, and rapidly increasing burnout syndrome in the workers (Hološová, 2011); therefore, it is necessary to deal with these issues and seek solutions. Based on the identified risks, we suggest the following recommendations:

- *Legislative regulation of the profession “professional parent”* (job description, working conditions and duties) in the Labour Code, which would deal also with the issue of taking a leave of absence. Professional parents have a right for a leave of absence and when taking it, they can temporarily place children in children camps or children’s homes. The professional parents, however, do not think these forms of taking a leave of absence are systemic measures.
- *Increasing and unification of salaries*. Payment of salaries to professional parents often depends on specific regions and financial budgets of children’s homes.

Professional parenthood is a nonstop job with increased expenses; therefore, it is necessary to increase salaries for professional parents.

- *Taking measures to provide psychological and social support for professional parents and their family members* through regular individual or group supervision sessions. Professional parents should be offered optimal forms of further assistance (therapeutic sessions, enhancement of professional abilities and skills) according to their requirements and needs.

Conclusion

The role of professional parents is to provide these children with all-day care in an environment with adequate stimuli for their development and natural role models of family roles. This type of care emphasizes particularly benefits and significance for a child (development of relationships, meeting needs, preparation of a child for adulthood, etc.). In the responses by the participants, we identified three areas of benefits of professional parenthood. Besides the benefits for children placed in these families, there are the areas of benefits for parents and their families, i.e. other professional family

members – husband, wife, biological children, and other relatives. The benefits include the opportunity for self-realization in working with children, the opportunity to work from home, or inclusion of other family members in care (development of relationships, enhancement of family cohesion).

The role of professional parents, however, is complex and very responsible. It brings risks for both professional parents and children placed in their care. Exhaustion of professional parents, as a result of nonstop care and a total loss of privacy, has serious consequences. In the families, disruption of relationships (quarrels in professional parents' partner relationships) can occur or they lose support from family members or other relatives.

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