# Socialization process and social support networks of out-of-care youngsters

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore the socialization process and social support networks of out-of-care youngsters in Catalonia (Spain). 21 youngsters were interviewed regarding the involvement of residential centers in their educational experience, their network of friends, their free time and their first social experiences after coming of age: housing, sentimental relationships and establishing a family. The qualitative analysis of the content of the information was carried out by means of an inductive classification process using descriptive analysis scales. Data shows that human relationships within the home and free time are important resources; and that homes must make an extra effort to assist youngsters with their academic learning by providing personalized support. Two clear profiles emerge from the analysis. The youngsters that have succeeded with their sociolabor insertion show better adaptability and social abilities than youngsters that have failed. The study concludes that residential centers focus on preparing youngsters to be financially independent; and it is necessary to implement social and emotional education programs that help youngsters to develop these abilities and create and maintain social relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

To ensure the professional insertion of youngsters from out of home residential placements, most residential care centers concentrate their efforts on the youngsters finding a job before they leave the center. But in the case of long-term, more embedded difficulties, support is often more likely to be found amongst the child's local networks, family and surrounding community (Gilligan, 2010). In their autonomous life, out-of-care youngsters will find many emotional, material and economical problems. So, in this process it is very important to have a supportive social network with friends, family, and other close people that can help by listening to them, discussing their decisions, and giving them emotional, material or financial support when they need it. Nevertheless, efforts to educate youngsters in social skills and help them to create their own supportive social network are not planned systematically (Villalba et al., 2012). So the relationship between youngsters and their biological families is one of the less-developed aims of the education programs in residential care; and although these programs aim to improve social insertion within the center, most of these do not include social insertion in the community (Bravo & Fernandez del Valle, 2001). Bravo and

Fernandez del Valle (2003) found that fostered youngsters in residential centers included more people in their description of their social network, but most of the figures were the care staff and foster peers with whom most will lose contact after leaving the residential centers. In fact, they perceived less support from their network than their non-fostered peers.

Through socialization, children learn about the attitudes, values, skills and behaviors acceptable for their sociocultural context that will help them to create their social network. The main socialization agents and contexts in this process are the family, peer groups and the school (Giddens, 2009).

The aim of this study is to explore the socialization process and social support networks of out-of-care youngsters and the residential centers' involvement in this process.

## 2. Literature review

In 2009, 0.59% of children in Catalonia were in care. 10% of these lived with their family and received care from the social services, 33.5% were placed in residential centers or foster homes, 33.5% were fostered by relatives, 10% were fostered by non-relatives and 8.7% were adopted (Acció Social i Ciutadania).

Residential care as a protection measure has been widely criticized [for reviews see Maclean (2003), Frensch and Cameron (2002) and Jones and Lansdverk (2006)] because residential programs are considered more restrictive, less family-oriented, and less community-linked than non-residential protective measures. Nevertheless, as Barth

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(2005) said, this resource will always be present in the protection of children and adolescents.

The most serious problem facing aged-out foster care teens is the loss of the financial, emotional and educational support that they received in residential centers. Different authors have pointed out that these youngsters are not prepared to live an independent life at 18 years of age (for reviews see Avery & Freundlich, 2009). Various studies have indicated that aged-out foster care teens are at a high risk of becoming unemployed, having a low level of education, lacking housing, suffering from mental health problems, lacking social support and being delinquent (Barth, 1990; Bravo & Fernandez del Valle, 2001, 2003; Cook, 1991; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 1998, 2001; Courtney et al., 2005; Farruggia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006; Fernández del Valle, Álvarez, & Fernánz, 1999; Festinger, 1983; Herran, García, & Imaña, 2008; Montserrat & Casas, 2006; Montserrat et al., 2010; Panchon, 1999; Sala, Villalba, Jariot, & Rodríguez, 2009; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010).

Different authors (Bravo & Fernández del Valle, 2009; Casas & Montserrat, 2009; Fernandez del Valle & Casas, 2002; Montserrat et al., 2010, Rutman, Hubberstey, & Feduniw, 2007) have said that aged-out foster care youngsters need support programs. In Catalonia, the autonomous government provides these youngsters with some money when they have to leave the residential center. Some of them can also live in flats supervised by care staff for 2 years, paying low rent. Nevertheless, there are not enough of these flats and the money is not sufficient to support them if they are unemployed. So most of them return to the biological families from which they were separated (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). In Catalonia 33.6% of aged-out foster care youngsters returned to live with their biological family when they left a residential center after coming of age (Sala, Villalba, Jariot, & Rodríguez, 2009).

As aged-out youngsters need employment in order to be autonomous, the care staff in residential centers advise them not to go into higher education and instead to find work once they reach the legal age of 16 (Jariot, Rodríguez, Sala, & Villalba, 2008). Different studies have highlighted the difficulties with the professional insertion of protected youngsters. Farruggia et al. (2006) attribute these difficulties to low educational levels, lack of prospects and poor social environment. In our studies, we did not find that the youngsters had a lower rate of employment, but their jobs were of lower levels and they had higher rates of professional instability. Finding employment is positively related to emotional stability, social skills and support from collaborative families (Sala, Jariot, Villalba, & Rodríguez, 2009). Nevertheless, the educational efforts to educate these youngsters in social skills and help them to create their own supportive social network are not planned systematically, and we do not know about the efforts of residence centers to improve their academic levels. Those who have struggled academically have less opportunities to obtain satisfactory employment in a competitive youth labor market (Cashmore & Paxman, 2007; Crawford & Tilbury, 2007; Dixon, 2007).

Socialization is the process by which people learn and internalize the sociocultural elements from their surroundings and include them in their personality structure. Thus, they adapt to the social environment in which they must live (Rocher, 1979; Shaffer, 2002:379). The main socialization agencies during childhood are the family, the school and the peer group (Giddens, 2009).

Several views concerning the relative importance of the family and peers as well as the degree of linkage between these two social systems have been suggested. Some believe that children's relationships with peers are largely responsible for the socialization of their behavior and that these are independent of family relationships (for a review see Parke et al., 2002). Parke et al. (2002) argue that parents play a major role in shaping when peer contexts are encountered, the nature and frequency of peer contacts and the quality of peer activities, through three different paths: 1) parent–child

interaction: teaching social skills necessary for successful peer relationships and creating in the child a cognitive representational model of social relationship. 2) Parents' direct advice concerning peer relationships. 3) And parents' regulation of children's peer activities and access to peers: through monitoring of their children's social activities; giving rules for play, mediating in social contacts, and using their social network as a source of potential peer contacts for their children.

The staff at residential care centers must provide youngsters with the educational guidance that a child usually receives from their family. So they have a major responsibility for regulating the socialization process of the fostered youngsters by teaching them social skills, giving them advice concerning peer relationships, monitoring their social activities in and outside the residence, enrolling them in extracurricular activities, etc.

The aim of this study is to explore the social support networks of out-of-care youngsters and residential homes' involvement in the academic education and socialization process. In particular, we asked them about the residential homes' involvement in terms of their educational experience, their network of friends, their free time and their first social experiences after coming of age: housing, sentimental relationships and establishing a family.

## 3. Method

As it was impossible to contact all the youngsters who had been fostered by Catalan residential homes, we contacted a small sample of 21 youngsters that had aged out of out-of-home residential placement with the aid of 12 residential centers that had collaborated in a previous study. The participants were selected by taking into account the success and failures of their transition processes and asking them to participate in the study. If they were willing, we asked them for their telephone numbers. Before starting the interviews, we informed the responsible Catalan administration (DGAIA), who gave us permission to carry out the research. The contacted youngsters were informed about the aim of the study and were asked to respond anonymously. All of the contacted youngsters agreed to participate, but some residential centers were unable to contact some of the youngsters because they had changed telephone number and contact had been lost.

The final sample comprised 13 girls and 8 boys aged from 19 to 28 years old. All of them were born in Spain, although one had immigrant parents. All together, these youngsters were fostered by more than 15 different residential centers. So, the exact number of homes is difficult to calculate because most of these youngsters had been in several homes. Six youngsters were fostered at one residential center, five youngsters went to two different residential centers, and 10 youngsters went to three or more residential centers. Three youngsters were fostered before they were 5 years old, 10 youngsters were fostered between 5 and 9 years of age, and 8 youngsters were fostered when they were over 13 years old.

The method selected to obtain information was the qualitative interview. This method was suitable for examining the youngsters' experiences. A semi-structured interview was designed. The topics of the qualitative interview were general data (age, sex, etc.), information about the involvement of residential centers in academic education and youngsters' social relationships with peers, information about their current social network, housing and problems (Table 1).

The interviews were conducted by two interviewers in order to minimize the subjectivity of the interviewer (DeTurk & Elissa, 2008, Kvale, 1996). The interviewers contacted the youngsters and asked them where they would prefer to be interviewed. Some of them preferred to be interviewed in the residential center, but most preferred for the interviewers to go where they lived, to their home or to a cafeteria. The duration of the interview varied depending on the youngsters, but most lasted for half an hour or 45 min. All of the interviews were