

# The child's place in the foster family: Use of conventional names and adoption intentions throughout childhood

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## Abstract

This longitudinal study examines the child's place in the foster family through the use of conventional names for familial figures (e.g., 'mum/dad') and through the foster parents' intention to adopt the child. Data were collected at two time points during childhood and adolescence, among children placed in kinship and non-kinship foster care in Norway. Children placed at a younger age and children in non-kinship foster care were more likely to call their foster parents for 'mum/dad'. Children placed at an older age and children in non-kinship care were more often presented as 'foster child' by their foster parents. Only 25%–34% of foster parents reported having considered adoption. The most common reason for not considering adoption was that they already deemed to be a family. The use of conventional names for familial figures in foster families might not necessarily reflect the child's integration into a foster family as it seems to be related to the age of the child at placement rather than to the duration of placement. Intention to adopt was relatively low, mostly because foster parents considered adoption as not necessary.

## KEYWORDS

belonging, family, foster care, integration, kinship care, language

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2022, about 9533 children between the ages 0 and 17 years lived in foster care in Norway in the custody of child welfare services (Statistics Norway, 2022b). About 33% of those children lived with members of their extended family or with someone known to them, also known as *formal kinship foster care* (Skoglund et al., 2022, p. 6), hereby referred to as kinship care. Placement stability is recognized as an important factor for the child's well-being as it gives the child the chance to settle down, build relationships, and to make itself at home (Salazar et al., 2018). Foster care can provide secure and stable homes for children (Biehal, 2019). This is one reason why child welfare services in Norway and other countries have increasingly

preferred placing children in foster care rather than in institutions. Another measure often viewed as securing stability is the use of relatives as foster parents. According to the Norwegian legislation, child welfare services must always consider whether someone in the child's family or network can become foster parents when children for different reasons cannot live with their parents (The Child Welfare Act; sect. 4–22). Although both non-kinship foster care and kinship foster care have been found to provide secure and stable homes (Biehal, 2019), many children also experience instability (Hedin, 2014) and uncertainty (Biehal, 2012, p. 959).

Bengtsson and Luckow (2020) examined in their study 'how children living in foster care create senses of belonging' (p. 106). According to them, the child must not just find its place in the new family,

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but also navigate between 'new and old family relations' (Bengtsson & Luckow, 2020, p. 107), which 'is not accomplished once and for all but is an ongoing process of feeling at home and being recognized as a rightful member of diverse family settings' (Bengtsson & Luckow, 2020, p. 116). To further a sense of belonging and for the well-being of the child, Hedin (2014) underlines the importance of being included in everyday family life activities and of 'a family that is willing to let the foster youth into the activities and rituals of everyday life and is open to cooperating with the adolescent's birth family' as well (p. 173).

Research shows that being included in day-to-day family activities is not just important for the feeling of belonging but also to display 'the family-like quality' (Biehal, 2012, p. 965) of the relationships between the child and the foster parents. Biehal (2012) emphasizes the importance of names and here especially the use of mum and dad that 'was of considerable symbolic significance to the children, as this represented both their membership of the foster family and the 'normality' of their relationships with this family' (p. 965). Biehal (2012) concludes that those names 'did not function as unambiguous statements of family membership, as they also referred to their birth parents [...] as Mum, Dad' (p. 965).

Names (such as 'mum' and 'dad' and 'son' and 'daughter') play a significant role in general as they are part of an identity and display a person's belonging to a family (Biehal, 2012; Davies, 2011). However, little is known about what predicts what children in foster care or foster parents call each other. The duration of the placement, the child's age at placement and the placement type (e.g., non-kinship foster care or kinship foster care) might be influencing factors. When it comes to the latter one, studies that examine the use of names in foster families are primarily based on non-kinship placements and on the use of surnames (Davies, 2011; Finch, 2008) rather than on the use of names like mum and dad that denote categories of relationships (Biehal, 2012, p. 965). Biehal (2012) writes furthermore that 'in the absence of a biological connection, the use of names such as Mum and Dad may be of particular symbolic value. These children used names to display and reinforce the family-like quality of relationships to themselves, their foster families and the outside world' (p. 965). When children are placed in non-kinship foster care, both the child and the foster parents may not know each other and have to build the new relationship and to find or develop names for each other. On the other hand, children placed in kinship care more often have a relationship with their foster parents *before* the placement, often defined through kinship titles. Hence, for children moving into foster care with their grandparents, aunts or uncles, the possibility to develop new names might be more difficult, or just less important, but it is worth investigating how it might evolve through time. In Norway, there are no formal guidelines or rules that specify what the child should or can call their foster parents and vice versa. Children and foster parents are free to choose whether they want to draw on the child welfare terminology (e.g., foster child or foster mother) or whether they want to use more general designations such as mum or dad.

On the other hand, what children in care call their foster parents might also be related to the age when the placement happens (Holtan, 2002, 2008). Dozier and Lindhiem (2006) found that foster parents were more committed to their children in foster care when they were placed at younger ages, which might be reflected in the increased use of names such as mum or dad. Biehal (2019) concludes that foster placements were more stable for children in foster care who entered the family at a younger age and who were without mental-health challenges. Also, the duration of the foster home placement could change what children and foster parents call each other over time. One qualitative study gives the impression that a longer duration may be related to 'more' integration and to becoming part of the family (Schofield & Beek, 2005), which again might be reflected in the use of names such as mum or dad. Similarly, other studies found that long-term foster mothers had less of a professional identity (Blythe et al., 2012; Smyth & McHugh, 2006) and perceived themselves as mothers and not as foster-carers (Blythe et al., 2012).

Another possible indicator for the child's place in the foster family is the intention of the foster parents to adopt the child. While the foster home is meant to be temporary, adoption is permanent and more than just a symbolic act as it makes the child a legal member of the family. When a child is adopted in Norway, he/she is no longer under the care and contractual follow-up of the CWS. The contractual follow up of the CWS includes regular home visits, financial support, and an individual care plan specifying the child's needs. Once the child is adopted, the adoptive parents have the full responsibility for the child (i.e., financially, practically, and legally) without any involvement from the CWS. That means that in Norway, children who are adopted have the same rights and are legally equated with children growing up with their biological parents. While adoption is a common practice in countries such as the USA, long term placements are more common in Norway (Skoglund et al., 2022, p. 44). This is among others because of the emphasis put on maintaining contact with and the possibility to return to the biological family (Ellingsen et al., 2011). Numbers from Statistics Norway show that only few children have been adopted in Norway the last years: in 2021 for example, 243 adoptions were carried out and only 36 of the children who were adopted were from foster care (Statistics Norway, 2022a). A study conducted in the USA points out that adoption is especially crucial for children with specific mental-health needs because it enhances the parental care that children with mental-health issues need (Leathers et al., 2012). The study also found that foster home integration, defined as how much the child is viewed as a family member, had an independent and positive effect on adoption (Leathers et al., 2012). As such, intention to adopt could also be an indicator of the child's belonging to the foster family in Norway.

## 1.1 | Study aims

In the current study, we examine the child's place in the foster family through the use of names such as mum and dad over time and

through the foster parents' intention to adopt the child. The aim of the study is to examine some possible predictors that might be associated with how children in foster care call their foster parents (e.g., mum or dad vs. foster mother or foster father) and with how foster parents present their child in foster care as (e.g., foster child vs. son or daughter). Furthermore, we examine if foster parents have considered to adopt the child at two measurement points in addition to the reasons for considering and not considering adoption, respectively.

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Participants and procedure

The current study is part of a longitudinal study that followed children placed in non-kinship and kinship foster care from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood in Norway. In 2000 non-kinship and kinship foster care families were asked to participate in the study. Of 234 kinship families, which represented 98% of all kinship placements in Norway for that year, 129 accepted to participate in the study (55%). In addition, of 192 non-kinship families invited from three different counties, 91 accepted study participation (47%). Foster parents recruited at the first measurement point had children in foster care aged from 3 to 14 years. Furthermore, the children had been placed in a court-ordered foster home for at least 1 year (Skoglund et al., 2023). Children were followed for 15 years through three measurement points. The current paper uses data from the first (1999–2000; T1; Holtan (2002)) and second (2006–2008; T2; Thørnblad (2012)) measurement points where foster parents answered a paper-based questionnaire. At T2, the same foster parents as at T1 (except for two children who had changed foster home) completed the questionnaires for 72 children placed in kinship care and 63 placed in non-kinship care. At both measurement points, the foster parents were invited to answer one questionnaire for each child placed in their foster home. The study is approved by the Regional Ethical Committee and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

### 2.2 | Measures

Demographic characteristics included the child's gender (girl or boy), the child's date of birth (month and year), when it moved to the foster parents (month and year), and if the placement was in non-kinship or kinship foster care. Based on the provided information, we calculated the duration of the placement of the child in the foster home and the age of the child when it came to the foster home.

At both measurement points, foster parents were asked what the child usually calls them for (e.g., 'mum/dad', 'mother/father' or 'first name') and what they usually present the child as (e.g., 'son/daughter', 'foster son/foster daughter', 'kinship names' or 'first name').

Answer categories were somewhat different at T1 and T2 but were recoded as 'mum/dad' (0 = No, and 1 = Yes) and 'foster child' (0 = No, and 1 = Yes) for the analyses. Multiple answers were allowed, and those reporting using 'mum/dad' and/or 'mother/father' were coded as 1 for the variable 'mum/dad'. Those reporting using 'foster son/foster daughter' were coded as 1 for the variable 'foster child', even when the denomination 'foster son/foster daughter' was reported being used in conjunction with other names (e.g., 'kinship names' or 'first name').

Furthermore, the foster parents were asked if they had considered adopting the child with the response categories 'No, never' (1), 'Yes, considered once in a while' (2), or 'Yes, considered seriously' (3) at T1 and 'Yes' (1) or 'No' (2) at T2. The answer categories 'Yes, considered once in a while' (2), and 'Yes, seriously' used at T1 were recoded to 'Yes' for analyses purposes. Foster parents also answered why they had considered adoption (e.g., 'as a result of relationship with the child', 'out of consideration for own children/me/my spouse', 'as a result of relationships with the child welfare service') or why they had not considered adoption (e.g., 'because we are already a family', 'because we want contractual follow-up from the child welfare services', 'because the child's parents do not want it') at the two measurement points.

### 2.3 | Data analysis

SPSS version 28 was used to conduct the analyses, which included the calculation of descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency distribution) in addition to the analyses of two multilevel models with categorical repeated measures outcome using general estimation equations (GEE; Heck et al., 2013). The data were longitudinal repeated measurements with two timepoints (T1 and T2) within the same subjects. In Model 1, the outcome variable was if the child called their foster parents for 'mum/dad' (0 = no, and 1 = yes). In Model 2, the outcome variable was if the foster parents presented the child as 'foster child' (0 = no, and 1 = yes). In both models, the predictors were gender (0 = girl, and 1 = boy), duration of the placement of the child in the foster home in years (duration placement), age of the child at placement in the foster home in years (age at placement), placement type (0 = kinship care, and 1 = non-kinship care), and time (1 = T1, and 2 = T2). An interaction term between placement type and time of assessment (placement type \* time) was added to the models to test whether an eventual effect of placement type could vary over time. Placement duration and age at placement in foster home were strongly correlated ( $r = -.57$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), but both variables were kept in the models to correct for the age of the child when testing for an effect of duration of placement.

An attrition analysis was conducted to test whether participation at T2 was linked to some demographic characteristics (sex, age at T1, and age at placement), to the placement type (kinship care or non-kinship care), or to intention to adopt at T1. We used a logistic

| Variable                                    | <i>b</i> | OR [95% CI]        | <i>p</i> |
|---|----------|--------------------|----------|
| Intercept                                   | 1.94     | 6.97 [2.06, 23.61] | 0.002    |
| Gender (girl = 0 vs. boy = 1)               | -0.32    | 0.73 [0.40, 1.33]  | 0.30     |
| Duration placement                          | 0.01     | 1.01 [0.90, 1.13]  | 0.09     |
| Age at placement                            | -0.47    | 0.63 [0.54, 0.73]  | <0.001   |
| Type of placement (kin = 0 vs. non-kin = 1) | 1.45     | 4.26 [2.21, 8.20]  | <0.001   |
| Time  | -0.07    | 0.93 [0.31, 2.81]  | 0.90     |
| Type of placement * time                    | -0.25    | 0.78 [0.46, 1.33]  | 0.36     |

Note: *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient.

Abbreviations: OR, odds ratio; 95% CI, 95% confidence interval.

| Variable                                   | <i>b</i> | OR [95% CI]        | <i>p</i> |
|--|----------|--------------------|----------|
| Intercept                                  | -2.13    | 0.12 [0.03, 0.47]  | 0.002    |
| Gender (girl = 0 vs. boy = 1)              | 0.22     | 1.25 [0.67, 2.32]  | 0.49     |
| Duration placement                         | -0.11    | 0.89 [0.76, 1.04]  | 0.15     |
| Age at placement                           | 0.24     | 1.27 [1.13, 1.42]  | <0.001   |
| Type of placement (kin = 0 vs non-kin = 1) | 0.72     | 2.02 [1.07, 3.92]  | 0.03     |
| Time                                       | -1.23    | 0.29 [0.04, 2.08]  | 0.22     |
| Type of placement * time                   | 1.58     | 4.85 [1.00, 23.67] | 0.05     |

Note: *b* = unstandardized regression coefficient.

Abbreviations: OR, odds ratio; 95% CI, 95% confidence interval.

regression analysis with participation at T2 as the dependent variable but found none of the independent variables to be significant (all  $p > 0.08$ ).

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | Participant characteristics

Of the 246 children for which we received survey data at T1, 111 (45.1%) were girls and 135 (54.9%) were boys. The mean duration of the placement of the child in the current foster home was 5.32 years ( $SD = 2.98$ ), and the mean age of the child when it came to the foster home was 3.78 years ( $SD = 2.92$ ). A total of 111 (45.1%) children were placed in non-kinship foster care, and 135 (54.9%) were in kinship foster care. The majority of children ( $n = 140$ ; 56.9%) called their foster parents for 'mum/dad' and about one fourth ( $n = 64$ ; 26.6%) of the foster parents presented the child as 'foster child'.

Of the 129 children for which the foster parents had answered the survey at T2, 55 (42.6%) were girls and 74 (57.4%) were boys. The mean duration of the placement of the child in the current foster home was 13.78 years ( $SD = 3.14$ ), and the mean age of the child when it came to the foster home was 3.79 years ( $SD = 3.15$ ). A total of 64 (49.6%) were placed in non-kinship foster care, and 65 (50.4%) were in kinship foster care. The majority of children ( $n = 73$ ; 56.6%) called the foster parents for 'mum/dad'

and 14.7% ( $n = 19$ ) of the foster parents presented the child as 'foster child'.

#### 3.2 | Factors predicting what children call their foster parents for

Table 1 presents the results of the GEE analysis predicting the odds of children calling their foster parents for 'mum or dad'. Age at placement (odds ratio [OR] = 0.63,  $p < 0.001$ ) and placement type (OR = 4.26,  $p < 0.001$ ) are significant predictors indicating that children placed at a younger age and children placed in non-kinship foster homes more often call their foster parents for mum and dad.

#### 3.3 | Factors explaining what foster parents present the child as

Table 2 presents the results of the GEE analysis predicting the odds of the foster parents to present their child as 'foster child'. Two predictors are significant ( $p < 0.05$ ): age at placement (OR = 1.27;  $p < 0.001$ ) and type of placement (OR = 2.02;  $p < 0.05$ ) are both positively related to the dependent variable, indicating that children placed at an older age and children in non-kinship care are more often called as foster child. The interaction term between type of placement and time is borderline significant ( $p = 0.05$ ) and positively related to the dependent variable, indicating that non-kinship foster care (type

**TABLE 1** Predicting if children call their foster parents for mum and dad ( $N = 243$ ).

**TABLE 2** Predicting if foster parents present their child as foster child ( $N = 242$ ).

of placement = 1) tends to increase the use of 'foster child' more from T1 and T2 compared with kinship care (type of placement = 0).

### 3.4 | Intention to adopt and reasons to consider/not consider adopting the child

Of 244 foster parents answering whether they had considered adopting the child in foster care, 161 (66.0%) had not considered adoption, while 83 (34.0%) had considered it at the first measurement point. The reasons most often reported for considering adoption were 'As a result of the relation to the child' ( $n = 63$ , 82.9%) followed by 'As a result of the relation to the child's parents' ( $n = 8$ , 10.5%) and 'Heritage' ( $n = 8$ , 10.5%). The reasons most often chosen for not considering adoption were 'Because we already are a family' ( $n = 69$ , 50.4%) followed by 'The child's parents don't want to' ( $n = 66$ , 48.2%), 'We want contractual follow-up from the child welfare service' ( $n = 29$ , 21.2%), and 'Other reasons' ( $n = 10$ , 7.3%).

Of 109 foster parents that answered the question if they had considered adopting the child at the second measurement point, 82 (75.2%) had not considered adoption while 27 (24.8%) had considered it. Almost all foster parents that had considered adoption ( $n = 25$ , 92.6%) had considered it 'For the sake of the child'. The most often named reason for not adopting was 'It is not necessary' ( $n = 46$ , 56.1%) followed by 'We want contractual follow-up from the child welfare service' ( $n = 25$ , 30.5%), 'The child's mother doesn't want to consent' ( $n = 24$ , 29.3%), 'Other reasons' ( $n = 17$ , 20.7%), and 'The child's father doesn't want to consent' ( $n = 8$ , 9.8%).

## 4 | DISCUSSION

In the current study, we examined the child's integration to the foster family through the use of conventional names for familial figures such as 'mum and dad' and factors affecting the use of those names; and through the foster parents' intention to adopt the child.

### 4.1 | Children using 'mum and dad' to call their foster parents

About 55% of the children followed in this study used 'mum and dad' to call their foster parents, with children placed at a younger age and children placed in non-kinship care being more likely to use those terms as compared with other children. Surbeck (2003) writes that there are 'differences in the names and meanings children give to caregivers based on children's age and stages of development' (p. 107). Children that are older at the time of the placement might be less open to call new carers for mum or dad and might not find it appropriate as in our culture it is usually only one mother and father (Surbeck, 2003). Older children might not be prepared to call the foster parent for mum and dad even when other siblings do that (Surbeck, 2003). Or it might be as Holtan (2008) shows that children

who are older at the time of the placement often exclusively view their biological family as family, leaving little room for negotiations of roles between the child and the foster parents.

Also, children in non-kinship foster homes called their foster parents more often for mum and dad compared with children in kinship foster homes. Surbeck (2003) writes that language impacts children's adjustment in foster care and that the use of the word 'mum' is an active way to create the relationship between the child and the carer. However, the pre-defined relationship in kinship care might limit the possibility for the child to call their foster parents for mum and dad. Taking into account the relationship between the child and its birth family might be of higher importance in kinship care than in non-kinship foster care. Even though the child might experience that the foster parents take over the roles of mum and dad, it might not call them for mum or dad. Holtan (2008) cites in her article for example Linda, a 12-year-old girl who has lived with her grandparents for the last 10 years, 'It's grandmother and grandfather I really feel are mother and father, in a way' (p.1029), whereas the birth mother 'retains her symbolic parenthood as "mummy"' (Holtan, 2008, p. 1029). Or, as a 20-year-old girl in another study said 'grandma is grandma, mom is mom' (Thørnblad & Holtan, 2011, p. 59). A study that examined characteristics of quality foster care found that some foster parents encourage the children to only call their birth parents for mum and dad. This is seen as one way to foster 'parenting with respect and humility' (Berrick & Skivenes, 2012, p. 1961).

We found no significant effect of 'time' on the use of 'mum and dad', which means what the child starts saying is what it generally ends up with. However, that does not necessarily mean that the child does not 'integrate' into the foster family through time. As an example, a review is inconclusive when it comes to how age at placement in foster care may or may not be related to attachment (West et al., 2020). They summarize both studies that find an association between a younger age at placement and more secure attachment and others that did not find an association. However, among the studies that found an association, this effect disappeared after 6 months or more after placement. Overall, the authors conclude that characteristics of the child in foster care seem less important for a secure attachment than characteristics of the foster parents (e.g., a positive parenting style; West et al., 2020).

### 4.2 | Foster parents using the term 'foster child' when presenting the child

Only 15% to 27% of the foster parents reported using the term 'foster child' to present their children (respectively at T2 and T1) and the probability to use 'foster child' was higher in foster families where the child had been placed at an older age and for children placed in non-kinship care.

In the same way that children placed in kinship care call their foster parents less often for mum and dad, relatives that take care of a child have the possibility to use the kinship name instead of using the term 'foster child' when referring to the child. Children can for



example grow up with their grandparents, who would probably present the child as grandchild to new people. Presenting the child as son or daughter would be challenging for them because of their relationship with for example their daughter or rather the child's birth mother. Holtan (2008) underlines in her research the importance of 'the history of the relations' (p. 1033) and of the relationships 'between parents, foster parents, and children in the individual placement' (p. 1033). Holtan (2008) categorizes families into five types and finds that most kinship foster families fall under the category for extended and polynuclear families. An extended family is a family characterized by 'high solidarity between mother and foster parents' (p. 1029) and 'where the parents help both their own child and their grandchild' (p. 1029). Hence, there is less room for the foster parents in kinship care to call the child for son or daughter. In a polynuclear family, the 'child experiences having his or her close family in several households' and 'includes both families in his or her family image' (Holtan, 2008, p. 1030). The nuclear family, consisting of one mother, one father and their biological children, has traditionally been the model (and ideal) for the foster family (Canetto, 1996). However, this is just a more conventional and idealized conception of what a family is or looks like, and there are other more complex family types.

The analysis indicated that foster parents in non-kinship foster care tend to increase the use of the concept 'foster child' more from T1 and T2 compared with foster parents in kinship care. The average age of the children at the first measurement point was approximately 9 years. It could be that the increased use of the term foster child in non-kinship foster care is connected to an increase of encounters in formal settings (e.g., schools) where foster parents feel it is necessary to present the child with its legal status. In kinship care, on the other hand, foster parents can present the child as for example their grandchild, even in formal settings.

### 4.3 | Foster parents' intention to adopt the child in foster care

Another possible indicator for the child's place in the foster family is the intention of the foster parents to adopt the child. This is especially true in Norway as it is not common to adopt a child (Statistics Norway, 2022a). In our sample, 34% to 25% of the foster parents reported having considered adopting the child in foster care, when the question was asked respectively during childhood (T1) and adolescence (T2). The most often named reason for considering adoption was 'As a result of the relation to the child' at T1 and similarly 'For the sake of the child' at T2. Altruistic reasons for adoption were also among the most often named motivations in a study from the USA (Malm & Welti, 2010). Malm and Welti (2010) found in their study that the main reasons to adopt a child that was known to the parents were to provide a permanent home for a child (75.4%), to expand the family (42.5%) and other reasons (61.4%). The main motivations to adopt a child that was not known to the parents were to expand the family (91.5%), to provide a permanent home for a child (86.3%) and infertility (78.3%; Malm & Welti, 2010).

In our study, the reason most often chosen for not considering adoption was 'Because we already are a family' at T1 and 'It is not necessary' at T2. 'It is not necessary' can mean the same as 'It is not necessary because we are already a family'. The second most often named reason was 'The child's parents don't want to' at T1 and T2 (when combining the alternatives given at T2 'The child's mother doesn't want to consent' and 'The child's father doesn't want to consent'). Interestingly, 20% to 30% of the foster parents named 'We want contractual follow-up from the child welfare service' as a reason for not considering adoption. With adoption, the child is no longer in custody of the state, and the relation between the foster parents and child welfare services (CWS) ceases. In other words, the foster parents who adopt lose the help, support and financial compensation they are entitled to as foster parents. This might be important reasons why some foster parents do not want to adopt.

### 4.4 | Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is its longitudinal design. However, some of our analyses were complicated because the answer alternatives were a bit different between timepoints. For example, it would have been desirable to conduct a longitudinal analysis to test whether intention to adopt varied through time, but because the answer alternatives to this question were a bit different between T1 and T2, we decided not to do this. Indeed, at T1 the foster parents could choose between 'Yes, considered once in a while', 'Yes, considered seriously' and 'No, never' to report intention to adopt, while at T2 they could only choose between 'yes' or 'no'. This might explain why we found a lower percentage of foster parents reporting that they had considered adoption at T2, since the threshold to answer a firm 'yes' might be higher compared with answering 'Yes, considered once in a while'.

Another limitation of our study is that we only asked what the foster parents were presenting the child in foster care as (e.g., daughter/son and foster daughter/foster son) but did not ask anything about the context. Many of them chose 'foster child' as one of the possible answer alternatives, but this does not tell us whether they use this concept at home or only in formal situations. Most probably, a large part of the foster parents who reported using the concept 'foster child' were using it in formal settings, for example with the teachers or in discussions with the CWS. We can hypothesize that this is why we found a tendency for the use of this concept to increase from childhood to adolescence for children placed in non-kinship foster care, but we have unfortunately no data to verify this hypothesis.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The way we use language and names impacts not just ourselves but also our relationship to others. Using names like mum and dad in foster families may be of even higher symbolic value as they create and display belonging to a family. The concept of mum and dad is often associated with a special relationship one has to his or her parents and

positive meanings that lie on an emotional and a social dimension such as security, trust and attachment. However, what a child calls its foster parents for (e.g., mum or dad) or what foster parents present their child in foster care as (e.g., as foster child) seems to be influenced by the age of the child when the placement happened and by the placement type. Not calling the foster parents for mum and dad or presenting the child as foster child might not necessarily reflect the child's lack of belonging to a family, but rather be influenced by the previous relationship the child might have to its foster and birth parents.

In the same way, the intention to adopt seems to be restrained by the wish to preserve the relationship to the birth family and maintain a supportive framework around the child through a formal follow-up from the CWS. However, it also seems that many foster families do not experience a need for adoption as they already feel that the child is a part of their family.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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