

## The Impact of Institutionalization and the Application of Alternative Forms of Child Protection in Greece: A Conceptual Review

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### Abstract

*This research paper provides a critical analysis of the Greek child protection system, focusing on the pressing need to transition from institutionalized care to alternative, family-based care solutions. Acknowledging the negative psychosocial and developmental effects of institutionalization, particularly for children with disabilities, the paper presents empirical evidence that underscores the urgency for reform. Historical and contemporary perspectives on child protection are explored, alongside the importance of legislative and community support for de-institutionalization efforts. The study advocates for a systematic overhaul to align the Greek system with international child welfare trends, including the promotion of foster care and adoption. By evaluating the existing legislative landscape, social attitudes, and psychological frameworks, the paper outlines the detrimental impact of institutional care on children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, calling for an inclusive national policy that privileges the well-being and integration of all vulnerable minors within a family-oriented context. The research concludes with recommendations for future work in exploring the practical implementation of family-based care models and assessing the long-term outcomes for children shifted from institutional settings to foster homes.*

**Keywords:** Child Protection, Cognition, Emotion, Institutionalization, Psychological Impact, Trauma

### 1. Introduction

Greece's child protection framework encounters challenges because there is a lack of a well-established research foundation for innovators to reference, unlike in the medical field (Aarons et al., 2010). Changes in the political and socioeconomic characteristics of children and families using Childcare Centers in Greece have influenced the Childcare Model, affecting the child protection framework



(Kalliopi, 2022). The lack of a thorough national child and family policy framework and foster care initiatives is noticeable, especially about unaccompanied minors, despite the explicit protection measures in the Greek Constitution, the UNCRC's 1989 Convention, and EU directives (Barn et al., 2021). The economic downturn in Greece has resulted in heightened poverty, the breakdown of social protection, and unaddressed intricate needs, leading to child neglect or maltreatment (Buchanan & Kallinikaki, 2018). Implementing evidence-based models in child welfare systems requires a structured multi-level approach guided by the EPIS conceptual framework. This framework highlights worldwide factors that impact contextual variables influencing interventions for children and families in public service sectors (Chamberlain, 2017).

Greece's national child protection system heavily depends on institutional care, despite pledges to enact care reform and legal measures for child protection (Chege & Ucembe, 2020). Institutionalization has repercussions beyond the children, impacting family members and parents who must handle the aftermath (Allgurin & Enell, 2022). Removing a child can result in long-lasting collateral consequences, emphasizing the intricacies of the child protection system (Broadhurst & Mason, 2019). In child welfare investigations of sexual abuse, attributing blame, and failure to protect is a rare occurrence and typically involves determinations of abuse by omission or supervisory neglect (Azzopardi, 2021).

Children in institutions in Greece, especially those facing maltreatment, show increased levels of externalizing behavior issues, highlighting the influence of institutionalization on their welfare (Mizuki & Fujiwara, 2021). Greece's economic crisis has led to social unrest and political instability, impacting the country's capacity to offer sufficient social protection and assistance to its young population (Papadopoulos, 2016). Research has focused on the intersection of poverty, deprivation, and child protection services, specifically about adoption in England and Wales (Lewis & Brady, 2018).

Research has extensively examined the impact of institutionalization on children's development, highlighting the necessity for enhancements in institutional care (McCall & Groark, 2015). Policy regimes impact how families and the state interact, molding the child protection system and interventions (Edwards, 2016). Greece's inadequate social protection has hindered successive governments from gaining support for making labor markets more flexible, leading to increased insecurity among young Greeks and their families (Papadopoulos, 2016). Research indicates that institutional rearing has a detrimental effect on the development of children's social skills and executive functions (Zeytinoglu et al., 2022). Children raised in institutions are more likely to develop internalizing and externalizing problems, as stated by Troller-Renfree et al. (2016). MacLean (2003) suggests that the effect of institutionalization on child development is more pronounced when combined with risk factors in the post-institutional setting. Global recommendations for deinstitutionalization have been made due to the detrimental effects of institutionalization on children's development and well-being (Gayapersad et al., 2019).

## **2. Child Protection**

### **2.1 Definition and Purpose**

The concept of child protection is directly intertwined with the concept of children's rights, which belong to the broader category of human rights and constitute an essential component of any modern legal order (Rizzuto, 2014). Both within the United Nations, at the European level and within the Council of Europe and the European Union, there is extensive legislation on child protection and children's rights. Also, a large part of European case law arises from cases brought for adjudication



based on an appeal by parents or other legal representatives of children, given their limited legal capacity.

In particular, the United Nations and the Council of Europe have adopted laws and regulations on child rights and protection. An example in this regard is the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 19 of which stresses the obligation of States Parties to take appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to ensure that minors are not subjected to any form of violence, abuse, assault, neglect, or exploitation by adults in their care. In addition, paragraph 2 of the same article specifies that the measures for child protection should include, where appropriate, procedures for the development of Programs, which aim to provide support to both the child and the adults in his or her care (European Commission, 2022). It is therefore understood that child protection and care is defined as the measures and activities that the state must take to ensure that all minors have the same opportunities to develop their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, social and emotional capacities and skills in a healthy, dignified and free manner. A similar definition is given by UNICEF (2021), which focuses on two sub-aspects of child protection. On the one hand, the provision of assistance and financial support in the form of benefits, pensions, tax relief and facilities. On the other hand, on the establishment and operation of social institutions that address both children and their families and include preventive child protection services, such as, for example, foster care, adoption, and institutional care (UNICEF, 2021).

In this regard, the United Nations states that the main objectives of child protection are the safety of children in the places where they live, play, and are educated, their access to child-centered services and processes, and their participation in activities that are relevant to their interests. Also, as the Organization specifies, the goal of child protection is to provide children who have disabilities or disorders with all the necessary goods and resources to fully develop their knowledge and skills possible (United Nations, 2017). Similarly, Georgiadis (2021), states that the aim of child protection is to ensure the fundamental rights of minors, namely their physical existence, their psychosocial and cognitive development, the fulfilment of their deeper psychological needs and the development of their personal identity (Georgiadis, 2021).

To summarize the above, the nature and the main purpose of child protection is to ensure that every minor is not subjected to violence, abuse, neglect, or abandonment by the adults in his or her care, and that he or she will not experience any form of exploitation. Therefore, the aim of child protection is to ensure the normal development of all minors (Fore et al, 2019; Farmakopoulou, 2022).

To achieve the above objective, a National Child Protection System has been developed in Greece, which focuses both on preventing the occurrence of offences against minors and on supporting victims and restoring normality. This system operates based on existing legislation, policies and regulations and has as its central focus the safeguarding of children's rights, as enshrined in both the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international instruments ratified by the country (EEDA, 2016).

## **2.2 Types of Child Protection Frameworks**

In Greece, different types of Child Protection Frameworks are recognized to cover the needs of all minors who for any reason need to be removed from their biological family or to receive the required support within the family framework. Furthermore, a distinction can be made between child protection frameworks based on the category of minors to whom they are addressed, i.e. whether they are children and adolescents with typical development, or children with disabilities or child psychiatric disorders.



More specifically, the child protection frameworks that address minors with typical development who have been removed from their families are mainly boarding schools and orphanages, children's homes, and church institutions (Georgiadis, 2021). Also, it should not be overlooked that there are also services within child protection frameworks for minors who remain and live with their families. These include, for example, the Early Childhood Care and Education Units, the Children's Creative Activity Centers, the Integrated Care Nurseries and finally the Summer Camps (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2021).

On the other hand, as mentioned above, there are child protection frameworks for minors with disabilities and child psychiatric disorders. These are the Centers for Creative Activities for Children with Disabilities, the Childcare Centers (CCCs) and the Psychosocial Rehabilitation Departments. These structures attempt to offer children with disabilities the support they need to develop in a holistic way, to integrate into society and to live as autonomously as possible in their daily lives (Georgiadis, 2021; Papachristopoulos, 2013; Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2021).

Finally, there are child protection frameworks for minors with child psychiatric disorders. This category includes, for example, Emergency Child Psychiatric Care Units, Child and Adolescent Psychosocial Rehabilitation Units and Psychiatric Care and Rehabilitation Facilities. Further, as far as the institutions that supervise the child protection frameworks are concerned, they are the state, the church, and the Non-Governmental Organizations. However, according to studies, private initiative, through the NGOs outweighs the other two institutions, since most of the operating NGOs units are supervised by the state (Georgiadis, 2021).

Although there are several different types of structures, open and closed care, the burning issue regarding the existing Child Protection Framework is that according to the European Union's Orders and Directives, Greece should have proceeded two decades ago with the deinstitutionalization program and should have implemented more extensively the Alternative Forms of Child Protection, i.e. the Institution of Foster Care and Adoption of Children. It is therefore imperative to investigate the way in which these structures operate, to determine whether they can meet the needs of minors and provide them with the support they need to develop their personality, knowledge and skills to the full.

### **2.3 History of Residential Care**

As mentioned above, in the context of child protection, both open and closed care structures operate in Greece, with the latter, however, predominating (Robokou-Karagianni, 2007). It is also interesting to note the evolution of closed care in Greece, which was developed as early as 1829, i.e. after the establishment of the Greek state. In particular, the then governor of the country, recognizing the needs of minors who had lost their parents during the war, founded the Orphanage of Aegina, which cared for more than 500 children and aspired to become a model for the organization and implementation of official state policy for minors. This orphanage ceased to operate in 1844. Further, in the mid-1850s, due to Greece's involvement in the Crimean War, the need for childcare arose again and two new orphanages were founded and operated in Athens on private initiative. These were the Amaleion orphanage for girls and the Hatzikonsta orphanage for boys.

In addition, during the same period and during the next twenty years, several other charitable - private foundations operated for the care of both orphaned children and those whose parents, due to poverty, were unable to care for them. Indicative examples of institutions that operated during this period are the Syros Brothers Babagioutou Orphanage for Orphans, the Zanneio Orphanage for Boys in Piraeus, the Hadjikyriakio Orphanage in Piraeus, and the National Papaphion Orphanage of Thessaloniki



'Melitheus'. Reference should also be made to the Municipal Infant Hospital of Athens, which was founded in 1859 and was the first institution that aimed to accommodate and care for abandoned infants and toddlers, as well as to protect mothers, regardless of their family situation. According to studies, the Municipal Infant Hospital of Athens accommodated about 50,000 infants and toddlers.

Subsequently, after the end of the First World War and due to the impact, it had on the Greek family, the state established the Patriotic Foundation of Social Welfare and Understanding (P.I.K.P.A.) in 1914, whose main mission was to treat and rehabilitate the wounded of the war and to support the children of needy families. Furthermore, important work in the field of childcare and welfare was carried out during and after the end of the Second World War, which is understandable, especially if one considers the fact that the war had a dramatic impact on millions of minors, not only in Greece but also throughout the world. Thus, as a relevant study (Kalliga, 1990) has shown, the number of institutions in 1965 approached 86, in 1975 it increased to 112, while in 1988 it decreased to 83. Most of these foundations were ecclesiastical and privately run, but they did receive state subsidies.

Finally, at the end of the 20th century, and specifically in 1992, Law 2082/92 was passed on the "Reorganization of social welfare and establishment of new institutions of social protection". This law provided for the establishment of the Advisory Committee for Social Affairs and the strengthening of open social care, such as, for example, home-based social protection, daytime creative work for infants and children and the promotion of child protection through the institutions of fostering and adoption. Also, the law referred to the training of human resources to staff social welfare institutions, as well as the administrative restructuring of the National Welfare Organization, the Patriotic Foundation for Social Welfare and Perception and the Infant Center "The Mother" (Athanasopoulou, 2010; Valassopoulos, 2014; Robokou-Karagianni, 2007).

From the review of the literature on the historical development of residential care in Greece, it could be concluded that already from the foundation of the Greek state, the state, the church and private individuals perceived children as vulnerable beings who needed protection and care. For this reason, institutions had been set up and operated for many years, both to care for orphaned children and to support their families. The concept of child protection had therefore been developing in the minds of citizens and institutions since the end of the 19th century, albeit informally. Nevertheless, the push for the closure of closed care institutions is based on the disadvantages of this form of protection, which will be studied in the next sub-chapter.

### **3. Theoretical Views on Institutionalism**

The issue of institutionalization and the effects it may have on children's development has been of concern to sociologists, educators, and psychologists, who have been developing and documenting their positions since the previous decades (DeSilva & Punchihewa, 2011). Because the institution of closed care, i.e. institutionalization of children, continues to exist to this day (Dozier et al, 2012), it is useful in this paper to present some of the theoretical views found in the Greek and foreign language literature on institutionalization and its effects.

More specifically, an extensive study on this issue has been carried out by Spitz (1945, cited in Sakkellaropoulos & Lazaratos, 2001), who among other things stated that when children are placed in an institution during the first years of their lives, they do not have sufficient stimuli and emotional motivation and therefore face the risk of total emotional deprivation, i.e. the absence of emotional expression (Sakkellaropoulos & Lazaratos, 2001). Similar conclusions were reached by Tsianti (2004),





according to which the placement of a child in an institution may have a negative impact on his/her social and psycho-emotional development, which will result in difficulties in forming relationships, not only during childhood, but also during adolescence and adulthood (Koutsopoulou et al., 2024; Tsianti, 2004).

Subsequently, Levy (1937, cited in Sarafidou 2000), stressed that children living in institutions tend to exhibit a distinct type of behavior, which probably constitutes a form of personality disorder. They develop particularly friendly behavior towards adults, regardless of whether they know them or not, precisely because they experience a lack of affection in their daily lives. Also, according to the psychiatric side, they exhibit other abnormal behaviors. For example, they cannot easily understand and accept boundaries, they feel very insecure and cannot easily adapt to their environment (Sarafidou, 2000).

Finally, Lambidi (1993), argues that, for the institution to be considered a suitable environment for the child to live in, the child should be involved in the decision-making process on issues that concern him/her, such as, for example, how daily life within the institution will be organized. Of course, there is a risk of creating psychological trauma for the child, since the institution will not be the ideal environment for the child to be brought up in a healthy way (Lambidi, 1993).

Considering the above theoretical views on institutionalization, it could be concluded that, although the stated purpose of institutions is to protect children who for whatever reason are deemed necessary to be removed from their families (Julian et al, 2019), nevertheless the consequences for these children are rather negative, especially in terms of their psycho-emotional and social development (Gkintoni et al., 2024a). Therefore, it becomes necessary to reorganize and redefine the objectives and priorities of closed care actions.

As noted above, according to theorists, institutional care may pose risks to the normal development of the minor (Browne, 2009). It is therefore useful, in the following paragraphs, to take a closer look at the developmental areas that, according to the literature, seem to be most affected. These are, in particular, the psychosocial, emotional and cognitive domains (Gkintoni et al., 2022a; Kalyva, 2016).

Additionally, leadership skills in the context of child protection and institutionalization are also influenced by the institutionalization process (Antonopoulou et al., 2020; Antonopoulou et al., 2019). The institutionalization of evidence-informed health policymaking, for example, requires a durable process through which structures become established, highlighting the importance of institutionalization in shaping leadership and policy frameworks (Farmakopoulou, 2020; Antonopoulou et al., 2021a; Gkintoni et al., 2022b; Kuchenmüller et al., 2022). Moreover, the impact of institutionalization extends beyond childhood, as evidenced by the risk of institutionalization being linked to children rather than spouses in the context of older adults with dementia (Antonopoulou et al., 2021b; Gkintoni et al., 2023b; Huvent-Grelle et al., 2021).

### **3.1 Impact on Psychosocial Development**

Psychosocial development is the formation of personal and social identity, as well as the acquisition of skills that will enable the child or adult to form relationships and interact effectively with the people around them (Miller, 2011). Further, according to developmental psychologists, the above is achieved through four distinct mechanisms, each of which operates in a different way. These are the mechanisms

of differentiation, attraction, imitation, and social learning, as well as the formation of cognitive schemas (Mooney, 2010).

Psychosocial development refers to establishing personal and social identity and acquiring skills necessary for forming relationships and interacting effectively with others (Miller, 2011). Developmental psychologists assert that four distinct mechanisms facilitate the abovementioned achievement, each functioning uniquely. These mechanisms include differentiation, attraction, imitation, social learning, and the formation of cognitive schemas (Mooney, 2010; Farmakopoulou, 2012).

Institutional settings frequently lack the consistent and responsive caregiving necessary for healthy emotional and social development. Neuroscience indicates that fostering relationships during early childhood is crucial for developing brain structures related to emotion regulation, social interaction, and attachment. Children in institutions may encounter setbacks in these domains, affecting their capacity to establish positive relationships and adjust socially (Sortwell et al., 2023).

Institutionalized children frequently experience cognitive and language delays in their development. Institutional settings usually lack the enriched and stimulating environments necessary for brain development. This can result in deficits in vocabulary, executive function, and cognitive flexibility, which are crucial for academic achievement and continuous learning (Tzachrista et al., 2023).

Institutional settings lacking individualized care may increase the risk of neglect or abuse, resulting in a higher incidence of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Gkintoni & Ortiz, 2023). Neuroscience aids in comprehending how exposure to stressors can change brain function and stress response systems, resulting in enduring psychological problems (Gkintoni et al., 2021d).

It is worth noting that the reason why the psychosocial development of the child has been the subject of systematic study by psychologists and sociologists alike, is that it has a decisive impact on the later course of a person (Gkintoni 2023; Schacter et al, 2012).

In this regard the psychosocial development of children in residential care, theoretical and empirical studies indicate that it is not normal, mainly due to the large size of the institutions and, by extension, their impersonal functions, which results in children being unable to form bonds with the adults who care for them or with the other children who reside there. Consequently, due to their chronic stay in the institution, they do not form their personal and especially their social identity and do not acquire the skills needed to help them form healthy interpersonal relationships (Kalyva, 2016; Miller, 2011).

Of particular interest in this direction is the study by Reid & Barth (2000), who pointed out that children who spend a large part of their lives in institutions are at risk of delinquent behavior and problems with the law in adolescence and youth. Relatedly, according to the researchers, these children are likely to have difficulty in later life in fulfilling their parental role since they did not live with their parents so that they could emulate them (Reid & Barth, 2000). However, encouragingly, findings from studies show that if a child is removed from the institutional setting within a short period of time and placed in foster care or foster care, then they are expected to show significant improvement in terms of psychosocial development (Antonopoulou et al., 2022a; Bajpai, 2017; Forber- Pratt et al, 2020).

### **3.2 Impact on Emotional Development**

It is widely accepted that people's physical health is directly related to their emotional health and balance and therefore special emphasis is placed on its preservation (Niedenthal et al, 2011). Further, according to studies, the experiences of infants and children determine their later emotional development. For example, children who grow up in a familiar and stable environment develop mostly positive emotions, which they are even able to express both verbally and non-verbally. Smooth emotional development appears to have a positive impact on people's daily lives, as it is associated with mental and physical well-being, functionality, and the establishment of healthy interpersonal relationships (LoBue et al, 2019).

On the other hand, psychologists argue that the emotional development of children growing up in institutions is not smooth, which is because they do not receive from adult caregivers the affection and tenderness they need and thus do not form emotional bonds (Kalyva, 2016). More specifically, it has been empirically established that these children are likely to develop behavioural disorders, such as for example anxiety disorder and affective range disorder, due to their difficulty in experiencing and expressing their emotions. Also, for the same reasons, children who grow up in institutions may develop personality disorders, that is, they may acquire either borderline or antisocial personality (Gkintoni et al., 2023a; Tarrulo & Gunnar, 2005).

However, the early removal of children from the institution and their placement in a family context, either through foster care or adoption, is expected to have a positive effect on their emotional development and thus deter the occurrence of the disorders mentioned above (Bajpai, 2017; Forber-Pratt et al, 2020).

### **3.3 Effects on Cognitive Ability**

Cognitive ability includes attention, speed of information processing, organization and logical thinking, memory, cognitive base, and metacognition (Goldstein, 2018). Numerous scholars point out that the development of cognitive ability depends not only on biological or genetic, but also on environmental factors. In particular, the stimuli that infants and children receive, the type and quality of their interaction with their family and social environment, as well as the environment in which they live, seem to play a particularly important role in terms of the development of their cognitive abilities (Antonopoulou et al., 2022b; Kolb, 2018; Sartika et al, 2021).

Given the above, it is reasonable that the cognitive ability of children living in institutions may not be sufficiently developed, especially in cases where they receive limited stimuli and do not interact effectively with adults and their peers. It should also be remembered that in many cases these institutions accommodate many children, without the corresponding number of qualified staff needed to ensure their smooth operation. Consequently, it is probably impossible for every child growing up in an institution to have the necessary healthy stimuli that will allow them to develop their cognitive abilities (Giannoulis et al., 2022a; Giannoulis et al., 2022b; Sheridan et al, 2010).

For example, as Browne (2009) argues, children living in institutions tend to have lower cognitive performance and lower scores on tests measuring intelligence, compared to peers growing up in a family, whether biological, foster, or adoptive. Still, scholars point out that these children do not develop vocabulary and generally the mechanisms of verbal and non-verbal expression to a satisfactory degree and have difficulties in concentration and attention (Antonopoulou et al., 2021; Gkintoni & Dimakos, 2022; Browne, 2009).





In addition, the underdeveloped cognitive ability of these children has a negative impact on their academic progress (Antonopoulou et al., 2023). As reported by Dozler et al (2012), there is a large population of students growing up in residential care facilities who underperform in all subjects, do not participate in the learning process and drop out of school early (Gkintoni et al., 2023c; Dozler et al, 2012).

In conclusion, as it emerged from the theoretical and empirical studies presented above, institutionalization has a negative impact, in the medium and long term, on people's quality of life, since it affects areas directly related to their daily life, such as psychosocial, emotional, and cognitive (Oikonomou et al., 2024).

#### **4. Quantitative & Qualitative Research in Child Protection**

The everyday life of children living in institutions, in the context of child protection policies, has attracted the interest of many scholars since the previous decades and therefore several research studies have been carried out, both in Greek and in foreign language literature. It is useful, at this point, to present the findings of some of these studies.

First, reference should be made to the research of Vorria et al. (2003) whose aim was to investigate the quality of the emotional bond that infants and toddlers growing up in institutions develop with caregivers. The research also aimed to show whether institutionalization is associated with delayed cognitive development, and to compare the level of sensitivity of institutionalized infant caregivers compared to that of mothers and day care center caregivers. Finally, the research aimed to investigate whether and to what extent the emotional security of the children living in the institution was related to their observed behavior and cognitive development. As such, 86 children living at the Mother's Infant Center, as well as 41 children growing up in a family setting and participating in day care programs, participated in the study. The research showed that the children's stay in the institution negatively affected all aspects of their development and was also directly related to a high rate of insecure attachment and the development of reactive attachment behavior. According to the researchers, such form of attachment is usually found in high-risk groups where children do not receive adequate care (Vorria et al, 2003).

Next, of interest is the research by Vorria et al (2006), which aimed to investigate and compare the social, cognitive, and emotional development of children during their time in residential care and when adopted by a family. To the study, they used 61 adopted 4-year-old children living in an institution during the first two years of their lives as the study group and 39 children living with their families as the control group. The domains examined in both groups were cognitive development, attachment security, shyness, emotional understanding, and the presence of behavioral problems (Halkiopoulou et al., 2021b). The main conclusion reached in this research is that institutional living in the first two years of life has a negative and long-term impact on all areas of children's development. It was also found that if a child moves to a foster family within this period, then he or she can more easily develop socially and emotionally, as well as develop secure attachments with caregivers (Vorria et al, 2006. Farmakopoulou, 2012).

Furthermore, the study by Martinez-Leal et al (2011), who focused on the effects of institutionalization on the physical and mental health of children with intellectual disabilities, is worth mentioning. To the research study, a sample of 1,269 minors who were residing in residential care institutions in 15 countries in the European Union was used. The results of the study showed that the main health



problems experienced by the minors because of their institutionalization were obesity and the development of mental disorders. It was also found that these children had limited access to preventive medical services, such as vaccination and screening for serious diseases. Therefore, the researchers concluded that the quality of life of people with disabilities living in institutions is low (Martinez- Leal et al, 2011).

Finally, it is useful to refer to the research study by Kalyvas (2016), which attempted to investigate the psychosocial behavior and interpersonal skills of children living in institutions. For this purpose, she used a sample of 96 preschool and school-age children residing in four child protection institutions in the prefecture of Attica as the research group, while the comparison group was 26 children living in foster care. The results of the research showed that the children living in institutions had reduced school performance, which according to the researcher was due to the insufficient development of their social and emotional skills (Gkintoni et al., 2021c). It was also found that children who had been placed in foster care had developed their social and emotional skills to a greater extent compared to institutionalized children (Kalyva, 2016).

Additionally, in the context of child protection, the potential impact of gamification on the child protection framework is an area that requires further exploration (Gkintoni et al., 2024b). While gamification has shown positive impacts on health-related behaviors, its application within the child protection framework remains an emerging area of research (Halkiopoulou et al., 2023). The use of gamification to engage and empower children within the child protection system, as well as to enhance their understanding of their rights and available support services, could be a promising avenue for further investigation (Sortwell et al., 2023). Additionally, the potential of gamification in training and capacity building for child protection professionals, such as social workers and healthcare providers, warrants attention (Gkintoni et al., 2021a).

From the research studies presented above, it could be concluded that the theorists' views on the negative effects of institutionalization on the development, evolution and emotional health of minors are confirmed, effects that seem to be long-lasting. In conclusion, it is of paramount importance and great need to reorganize and redefine the objectives, priorities, and the way in which closed care structures operate.

The review of the literature on child protection frameworks in Greece revealed some statistics that are of particular interest, since they reveal the number of structures and their guests, as well as the evolution of child protection. Mention should be made of the study carried out by the Institute of Child Health and the Infant Centre 'The Mother' on the child protection frameworks in Greece during the five-year period 1979-1984. The study showed that during that period there were 274 closed care structures in operation, which accommodated a total of 16 000 typically developing children. However, this study did not consider children with disabilities and children with psychiatric problems, who were also living in residential care. Therefore, the actual number of children in care at that time was considerably higher (Georgiadis, 2021).

Several years later, in 2014, a study was carried out on child protection institutions for both typically developing children and children with disabilities. The results of the survey showed that in that year there were 85 closed care institutions in operation, 40% of which were privately run, 37% belonged to the state, while 13% were set up on the initiative of NGOs. These institutions accommodated a total of 2 825 children, of whom 833 had some form of disability. Another finding was that most of the children living in the institutions were in the 18 and over age group, while the 0-3 age group had the smallest population.



As for the reasons why, children were placed in residential care institutions, the study found that the three main reasons were the child's disability, neglect, and abuse by the family environment. This study included data on the fostering and adoption of these children, but this was not encouraging. More specifically, in 2014, only 32 children were placed in foster care, while out of a total of 85 closed care institutions, only 11 operated adoption programs and therefore 84 children were adopted (Nanu, 2015).

Finally, moving on to 2022, according to data collected by the National Centre for Social Solidarity (NCS), there are 93 closed care facilities for minors, 9 of which accommodate children with disabilities. The population of children amounts to 1393, 137 of whom have been diagnosed with some form of disability. Interestingly, data on the number of adoptions and foster care placements for the previous year are also interesting, as 589 children were adopted and 529 were placed in foster care (paidi.gov.gr, 2023). Considering the above figures, it could be concluded that, over the years, institutional care in Greece has been declining, while there is a tendency to prefer the placement of minors in foster care or in adoption.

This follows from the ever-decreasing population of minors in institutions and the ever-increasing population of those children placed in families. This is encouraging because, as the previous sub-chapters have shown, institutionalization has mostly negative effects on the development and quality of life of minors.

Finally, the relatively small number of structures that can accommodate children with disabilities should be noted. This finding is controversial and partly positive, since, as mentioned above, institutionalization is rather negative for these children, but also partly negative since it probably indicates a lack of concern for people with disabilities on the part of the state and other institutions.

## **5. The Need for De-Institutionalization**

The necessity for the removal of minors from closed care institutions was well documented in the previous subchapters, where theoretical and empirical studies were presented showing that institutions, despite their intention to the contrary, cannot guarantee the safety and well-being of the children they house (Delion, 2005). Therefore, this section will discuss the issue of de-institutionalization of minors, and in particular the models that have been developed and implemented towards this end, as well as alternative forms of child protection as proposed by the literature.

### **5.1 De-Institutionalization Models**

De-institutionalization is based on the principles of participation, inclusion, non-discrimination, equality, choice, and control over life, as well as the right to receive support tailored to individual needs. These principles form the basis of fundamental human rights, which should be guaranteed for all citizens, both minors and adults.

Recognizing the above and especially the imperative need to remove minors from closed care facilities, Greece has adopted a comprehensive de-institutionalization strategy, the main objective of which is to create a stable and strong framework of social care systems, for children, especially those who are neglected and those who have some form of disability, to be fully integrated into society. In addition, the strategy aims to create the right conditions so that all individuals, regardless of their support needs, can participate in society, enjoying their fundamental rights (EASPD, 2021).



As far as the de-institutionalization models applied in Greece are concerned, it is first of all the community and family-based model of care, as proposed by the European Commission and the European Expert Group. More specifically, the basic principle of this model is that children, whether they are typically developing or have some form of disability, benefit most if they are removed from the institution and integrated into a family and into society.

For this reason, the states that have adopted this model, including Greece, first undertake actions to prevent institutionalization, supporting the family in various ways, from the birth of the child until his or her adulthood. To this end, they are implementing personal assistance programs, staffing the social services of municipalities with adequately qualified personnel, and strengthening the existing network of care centers, including creative employment centers, rehabilitation facilities and temporary care centers (Gkintoni et al., 2021b). This is necessary since it has been established that one of the main reasons why children are separated from their families is that they live in conditions of poverty and neglect and that their basic needs are not met.

Also, in implementing this model, states are developing services at the local community level, such as, for example, housing services, which are not like the institutions that have been in operation until now, are staffed by adequately trained personnel and give the children in their care the opportunity to make decisions that affect their daily lives.

As will be mentioned in the next paragraph, this model favors the placement of the minor in foster care, considering it to be one of the best alternative forms of child protection ([deinstitutionalisationguide.eu](http://deinstitutionalisationguide.eu), 2018). In addition, the model of supported semi-autonomous living is recognized, which can be applied to children over the age of 15. This model was designed by UNICEF, in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and has the main objective of strengthening the independence and autonomy of adolescents within the community. To this end, homes are available where minors can live in groups, with the support of educators and social workers ([Unicef.org](http://Unicef.org), 2022).

## **5.2 Alternative Forms of Child Protection**

In the last decade and especially after the legislative framework 4538/2018 for the implementation of both institutions: fostering and adoption, all childcare facilities throughout Greece are making a great effort to harmonize with the legislation in force. Therefore, nowadays is a common practice to apply these alternative forms of child protection (fostering and adoption), due to the evidence based negative consequences for minors in closed care in Greek institutions ([eurochild.org](http://eurochild.org), 2020). According to Farmakopoulou (2020), two recognized alternative forms of child protection, which can guarantee that minors will reap multifaceted benefits, are fostering and adoption.

As far as fostering is concerned, it could be noted that it has been recognized as an alternative form of child protection since the middle of the last century, while the recent Law 4538/2018 has introduced the necessary amendments to ensure the smooth implementation of the procedure and the best interests of the child to be placed in the foster family (Georgiadis, 2019). Fostering is the temporary care of a child, by a third person or family, preferably the relatives of the minor. Foster care can range from a few days up to a couple of years. This alternative type of child protection framework is mainly used when the biological parents of the child are not able to provide the safety and care needed for him/her to grow up properly (Georgarou, 2023; Delap & Melville, 2011). It has been found that child fostering can have a great impact on cognitive abilities. Foster parents, play a significant role in shaping cognitions in children and impact cognitive development, since nurturing connections within families can influence a child's cognitive development (Gkintoni et al., 2021c). Within the implementation of



the foster care institution, emotional intelligence, positive family relationships, and emotional support are crucial for enhancing the emotional well-being of foster children (Halkiopoulos et al., 2021b). Child fostering has also a significant influence on the mental well-being of children in this alternative form of childcare. The positive parenting skills of foster carers play an important role in the enhancement of fostered children's mental health (Nduwimana et al., 2016). Furthermore, therapy strategies for foster families who are mentalization-based have demonstrated the capability to enhance child-care relationships and ameliorate emotional and behavioral well-being (Dalgaard et al., 2023).

It is important to mention that there are various forms of fostering. In terms of the relationship between the child and his or her fostering parents, the following two types are recognized: kinship and non-relative fostering. It is considered to be beneficial for the minor's actual care to be taken by his/her relatives, even from extended family environment, with whom the child has usually already developed emotional ties and therefore the minor's cohabitation is expected to be smoother. Having taken into account the paramount significant issue of the length of stay in the foster family, the following forms are distinguished: short-term, medium-term, long-term, residential, day care and emergency foster care. Based on the type of forms of fostering there are different types of contracts that foster care parents are engaged to: the contractual, the judicial and the professional ones (Georgarou, 2016).

On the other hand, another common alternative type of child protection worldwide is adoption. A key element of this child protection framework is its permanent nature, unlike fostering, which is a temporary measure (Spyridakis, 2006). Adoption is a legal act carried out by a court decision, which creates a parental relationship along the lines of a biological one, where the child acquires the same surname as his or her adoptive parents and the same rights and obligations as the biological child. The foster family does not replace but substitutes for the biological family until the latter is ready, according to the Public Children's Procurator's Office, to return the child/children to it. There are three types of Child Adoption: a) Adoption of a child by a State Institution or a Private Non-Profit Organization in Greece, b) Private Adoption when the prospective adoptive parent knows the child and the biological parents who wish to give the child up for adoption from the Public Health & Social Welfare Departments of each region, and (c) Intercountry Adoption for the adoption of a child from another country by the Public Health & Social Welfare Departments of each region working in cooperation with the International Social Service (Farmakopoulou, 2020).

Finally, it should be noted that the state favors both alternative forms of child protection, recognizing the importance of de-institutionalization and of the child remaining within the family framework. For this reason, Law 4538/2018 has simplified the procedures required for fostering and adoption, while setting strict criteria to ensure that the child has the best possible quality of life in the family where he or she will be placed (Peraki, 2018, Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research reviewed collectively underscore the critical need for Greece to confront the enduring challenges within its child protection system, particularly the issue of institutionalization. Through the prism of various studies and legislative frameworks, the studies highlight a host of negative consequences that institutional care inflicts on children's psychosocial, emotional, and cognitive development. The evidence compellingly argues for the deinstitutionalization of childcare, advocating for a systemic shift towards alternative methods such as foster care and adoption. Key findings, including Kalyva's study on school performance and the potential of gamification, foster fresh





perspectives on how to better integrate and support at-risk children within the educational and social fabric.

The paper's narrative stresses the imperative of redefining child protection policies that not only meet immediate needs but actively promote the well-being, developmental success, and societal participation of children. It encourages stakeholders to evolve from traditional, rigid frameworks to dynamic, family- and community-based care models. Taken together, the research demands a multipronged approach: urgent reform of child protection priorities, recognition of the benefits of inclusion and community care, and continued exploration of innovative strategies like gamification to enhance children's recovery and learning experiences. Long-term sustainability of such reform's hinges on robust empirical data, effective legislative changes, ongoing monitoring, and adapting to the evolving needs of children and caregivers. The call to action is clear: for the welfare of its most vulnerable members, it is time for Greece to align its child protection system with models that nurture, empower, and uplift.

Future work arising from this paper could explore the practical implications of moving towards family-based care models, examine the effectiveness of recently implemented legislative changes, and investigate the long-term outcomes for children who have experienced foster care and adoption. Investigating the challenges in implementing family-based care solutions, particularly in the context of Greece's current economic crisis, would be of great importance. Moreover, concerted efforts should be made to gather firsthand experiences from all stakeholders within the child protection network, including children, biological and foster families, and professionals. This will provide a more nuanced understanding of the system's effectiveness.

Among the limitations is the scarcity of empirical data specific to the Greek system's responses to child protection challenges, especially regarding children with disabilities. Potential racial, cultural, and socioeconomic heterogeneities within Greece that can influence child protection outcomes warrant a more tailored approach that considers these factors. Furthermore, there is a need for updated research that reflects the rapidly changing socio-economic landscape, particularly post-economic crisis and considering the impact of external factors like the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, addressing the heterogeneity of the existing research, broadening geographical scopes, and ensuring the cultural relevance of the studies will be crucial for the generalizability and applicability of future findings.

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### **Legislation**

- [1] Official Journal of the European Communities 2000/ C 364/1. Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.
- [2] Official Journal of the European Communities 2007/C 306. Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community.
- [3] FEC 158/A/21-9-1192. Law 2082/1992 "Reorganization of social welfare and establishment of new institutions of social protection".
- [4] FEC 192/A/2-12-1992. Law 2101/1992 "Ratification of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child".
- [5] FEC 144/02-09-1993. Presidential Decree 337/1993 'Determining the terms and conditions for the placement of minors in foster families'.
- [6] FEC 278/30.12.1996. Law 2447 "Ratification as a code of the draft law "Adoption, guardianship and fostering of minors, judicial assistance, judicial custody of foreign affairs and related substantive procedural and transitional provisions".
- [7] FEC 114/A/16-7-2009. Presidential Decree 86/2009 "Organization and operation of the institution of fostering minors".
- [8] FEK A' 85/16.5.2018. Law 4538/2018 "Measures for the promotion of the institutions of fostering and adoption and other provisions".
- [9] GOVERNMENT GAZETTE 4489/2018. Ministerial Decision No. D11 οικ. 49075/2067 "education and training programmes for prospective foster parents and continuing education programmes for foster parents".
- [10] GOVERNMENT GAZETTE 5090/2018. Ministerial Decision No. D11 οικ. 57758/2484 "Regulation of the National Council for Adoption and Foster Care".
- [11] GOVERNMENT GAZETTE 1163/2019. Ministerial Decision No. D11 οικ. 13734/538 "Development and Operation of an Information System for Special and National Registers of Minors, Foster Care and Adoption".