



## Benefits, Risk Factors and Cognitive Insights for Improving the Well-being of Minors in Greek Foster Care

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### Abstract

*This research paper presents a holistic analysis of the foster care system in Greece, exploring its historical evolution, legal nuances, practical concerns, and the recent legislative reforms aimed at improving the well-being of minors in foster care. The study examines various types of foster care arrangements—kinship, non-relative, and professional fostering—highlighting their impact on the psychological, social, and cognitive development of children. It underscores the crucial role of foster families and social workers in providing a conducive family environment, while also cataloging the potential drawbacks of the system, including professional intervention challenges, emotional and social strain on the children, and gaps in the fostering infrastructure. By comparing the Greek fostering institution with systems in France, Germany, Denmark, Italy, and Ireland, the paper identifies unique challenges and best practices, contributing to an understanding of international foster care dynamics. The research also delves into the intricacies of adoption versus fostering, detailing the emotional and legal commitments involved. Furthermore, the paper integrates insights from related studies on trauma, mental health, and educational neuroscience, providing a multidisciplinary perspective on the needs of foster children. It illustrates the promising strides made by initiatives like the Child Guarantee program to fight poverty and exclusion, emphasizing the need for targeted policies and legislative action. Toward its conclusion, the research accentuates the call for ongoing interdisciplinary studies, policy refinements, and improved professional training within Greek child welfare systems. It presents a compelling case for robust, trauma-informed care frameworks and legislation designed to secure the best outcomes for vulnerable children in foster care.*

**Keywords:** Foster Care, Foster Children, Education, Mental Health, Trauma, Adoption, Cognition

### 1. Introduction

Fostering in Greece involves a multifaceted system of advantages and potential drawbacks that substantially influence the well-being of children, families, and society as a whole. Foster care is crucial for giving children stable and nurturing environments, providing them with opportunities for growth,

development. Nevertheless, the fostering process has inherent challenges and potential risks that require thorough consideration and robust support systems. The potential merits of foster care in Greece are varied, including offering caring and supportive families for children who may not have had such opportunities otherwise. References by Vorria et al. (2003) and Lewis & Brady (2018) provide insights into the psychological factors and experiences of children raised in residential group care, highlighting the assets of foster care. References by Barn et al. (2021) provide a comprehensive view of the legal and social acceptance of fostering, highlighting its positive aspects.

On the other hand, foster care also comes with inherent risks and challenges. References by Kadir & Mohd (2022) and Damaskopoulou et al. (2022) explore the broader economy and policy implications which offer a detailed understanding of the factors influencing foster care practices in Greece. Anastasiou (2021) and Lazarides & Drimpetas (2011) provide valuable information on the spatial and sociodemographic aspects of fostering and the assessment of corporate governance, revealing the intricacies and difficulties in this field. Overall, the fostering child protection framework in Greece is complex and ever-changing, presenting benefits and potential disadvantages. A comprehensive understanding of the institution of fostering in Greece can be achieved by combining various perspectives to explore its potential advantages and challenges that must be overcome to safeguard the well-being of children and families.

## **2. Fostering of Minors**

### **Definition and Purpose of Child Fostering**

Several researchers as well as state organizations have dealt with the institution of child fostering and its individual characteristics. There are several definitions which have more similarities than differences, but it could be stated that fostering is the temporary assumption of the actual care of a minor, by a third person (relative or non-relative), for a period that can range from a few days to a few years. Foster care is deemed necessary when the biological parents of the minor are not able to provide the safety and care needed for the minor to grow up properly (Barbell & Freundlich, 2001; Delap & Melville, 2011; Georganou, 2016).

Considering the above-mentioned definition, the basic purpose of the institution of fostering and, by extension, the role of foster parents can be understood. More specifically, as will be analysed below, the institution of foster care focuses on the protection of minors, especially those who do not live within a secure family context and are confronted with situations that may negatively affect their overall development (Georganou, 2016). In this regard, adults who assume the role of foster parents aim to meet the physical/biological, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of the minor for him/her to develop smoothly in all these areas and have a good quality of life, both as a minor and as an adult (Vecciato et al., 2016).

Finally, it should be noted that, for the selection of foster parents, a social survey is primarily carried out by specialized social workers, which focuses on examining their motivation, their mental and physical health, their living conditions, their personality traits and, above all, their love for children in general. In this way, among other things, it is established whether and to what extent the purpose of fostering, as identified above, can be achieved in practice (anynet.gr, 2022).

## **Differences between the Institutions of Fostering and Adoption**

It is important to mention that apart from the institution of fostering a very common alternative institution in child protection is adoption. Both child protection institutions under consideration have as their central axis the safeguarding of a family environment for the minor who has been removed from his/her family, in order to avoid the risk of being placed in a closed care institution or to remain in it as little as possible. Therefore, both adoption and fostering aim to de-institutionalize the minor (Berrick et al, 2023).

However, despite their common objective, these two institutions also present significant differences, which mainly concern the way they are implemented and their legal consequences (Vamvakidis et al., 2021). More specifically, a key characteristic of adoption is stability, since in the majority of cases the minor does not move and does not return to his/her biological family but is integrated into the family from which he/she has been adopted. On the contrary, the main characteristic of foster care is its temporary nature, since the minor is usually placed for a short period of time in the foster family, without creating a natural kinship bond with it, as is the case with adoption (Kallinikaki, 2001). It should be stressed at this point that the temporary nature of the institution of fostering works rather negatively for the emotional development of the minor, as soon as he or she experiences repeated separations and therefore finds it difficult to cultivate ties with the people who take care of him or her. This is not the case with adoption, since once the minor is permanently placed in the family, he or she is not separated from it, but instead has the time needed to bond emotionally with the family (Spyridakis, 2006).

With regard, further, to the legal effects resulting from the application of the two institutions, it is worth recalling that the institution of adoption provides for the assumption of parental responsibility for the minor by the family, which means that the adoptive parents are responsible for taking decisions on all issues concerning the daily life and development of the child, without being required to inform the biological family of the minor about these decisions. Furthermore, the latter receives the surname of the adoptive family and in practice becomes an equal member of the adoptive family, since he or she has the same rights and obligations as the other members. On the other hand, foster parents are only responsible for the actual care of the minor for as long as they host him or her, while the biological parents or the guardian exercise parental responsibility. Furthermore, even in matters relating to actual care, foster carers must inform and cooperate with the biological parents, with the best interests of the minor in mind. Finally, it should be noted that the minor does not receive the surname of the host family and does not become an equal member of it, from a rights perspective (Kallinikaki, 2001). Finally, it should not be overlooked that the two institutions differ in the way they are constituted; in particular, in the case of Adoption, the constitution is made only after a court decision, while in Foster Care it can be made both judicially and contractually (Seferides, 2022).

## **Child Fostering Impact in Cognition and Emotion**

Child fostering can significantly influence cognitive abilities, especially children's growth. Maternal attitudes and child-rearing knowledge significantly impact children's cognitive development through the quality of the home environment (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Parents, including foster parents, play a significant role in confronting anxious cognitions in children, which can impact cognitive development (Emerson et al., 2019; Gkintoni & Ortiz, 2023). Research indicates that nurturing connections within families can significantly impact a child's cognitive development (Gkintoni et al., 2021c). Parenting practices, marital adjustment, and child temperament impact children's ability to regulate behavior and emotion, affecting cognitive development (Gkintoni, 2023; Gkintoni & Dimakos,

2022; Planalp et al., 2019). The fostering assignment can significantly influence the dynamics within a foster family, showcasing the intricate relationships within the family unit (Höjer, 2004). Furthermore, the dynamics between foster parents and their biological children can significantly impact parent-child relationships in foster households (Thompson et al., 2014). Child fostering can have complex effects on cognition, which are influenced by factors like the quality of the home environment, parental attitudes, dynamics within foster families, and emotional expression. It is crucial to comprehend these dynamics to enhance positive cognitive development in children in foster care (Gkintoni et al., 2023a; Halkiopoulou et al., 2023).

Fostering children can significantly affect the emotional welfare of children in care. Emotional intelligence is essential for foster children and carers to promote positive emotional results in foster care. Studies show that fostering emotional intelligence in children assists them in recognizing and expressing emotions, managing emotions, cultivating empathy, forming healthy relationships, and sustaining them (Coşkun et al., 2021; Gkintoni et al., 2023d). Strong family bonds, such as parental care, affection, and assistance, have been shown to improve children's emotional intelligence, empathy, ability to recognize emotions, and emotional regulation (Shen et al., 2020; Sortwell et al., 2023; Tzachrista et al., 2023). The quality of the parent-child relationship, involving emotional containment and support, is crucial for foster children to develop well and have better emotional and behavioral health (Dalgaard et al., 2023; Gkintoni et al., 2021a). Foster carers' emotional intelligence and capacity to offer emotional support are crucial for enhancing the emotional well-being of foster children (Gkintoni et al., 2023b). The Reflective Fostering Program has successfully enhanced children's emotional and behavioral well-being in care by improving the child-carer relationship (Midgley et al., 2021).

Studies have evaluated training programs for foster carers to determine their effect on children's emotional and behavioral well-being, highlighting the importance of assisting foster carers in comprehending and managing the emotional needs of their children (Minnis et al., 1999). Emotional intelligence, positive family relationships, and emotional support within the foster care system are crucial for enhancing the emotional well-being of foster children (Halkiopoulou et al., 2021b). Promoting emotional intelligence and creating a nurturing emotional atmosphere can lead to favorable emotional results for children in foster care (Farmakopoulou, 2012).

Child fostering has a substantial effect on the mental well-being of children in foster care. Studies have indicated that foster children are more likely to experience mental health problems because of issues like neglect, abuse, and unstable living situations (Lehmann et al., 2013; Bruskas, 2008). Challenges remain in keeping foster children in less restrictive living situations despite attempts to offer mental health services (McMillen et al., 2004). Research has shown that a significant number of children in foster care face mental health issues, but only a tiny portion get the required support (McDavid, 2015). Foster children frequently display adverse mental health effects, such as heightened externalizing and internalizing issues (Lohaus et al., 2017). Children in foster care have significant mental health needs, including high rates of psychiatric diagnoses and a substantial need for mental health services (Zima et al., 2000). Foster parents have a significant impact on the mental well-being of foster children, and their stress levels are a critical factor that affects the mental health of the children they care for (Goemans et al., 2020). Positive parenting helps to moderate the relationship between being in foster care and children's mental health (Nduwimana et al., 2016).

Research has shown a mutual connection between mental health issues in foster children and stress in foster parents, as demonstrated in longitudinal studies by Lohaus et al. (2018). It is essential to focus on the mental health needs of children in foster care. Mentalization-based therapy strategies for foster

families have demonstrated the potential to enhance child-care relationships and improve emotional and behavioral well-being (Dalgaard et al., 2023). It is crucial to comprehend the experiences and viewpoints of foster children to offer sufficient mental health assistance and encourage favorable results (Kelly & Salmon, 2014). Collaboration between child welfare and mental health systems is essential to guarantee that children in foster care get the necessary mental health services (James et al., 2004). Ultimately, the mental well-being of children in foster care is a crucial issue that requires extensive support systems, such as mental health services, caregiver education, and specialized interventions to tackle the distinct obstacles encountered by this susceptible group.

### **3. Historical Review of the Institution of Fostering in Greece**

The institution of fostering in Greece was developed relatively recently, only in the early 1990s, with successive and complementary laws, which aimed to regulate issues related to fostering (Peraki, 2018). Historically, the first law passed in the Greek Parliament concerning the institution of fostering was 2082/1992, which concerned social welfare and social protection. Article 9 of this law mentioned the possibility of placing in a foster family those minors who were living in an unsuitable family environment for a certain period until they reached adulthood. The exception, according to the legislator, was minors with a form of disability or disorder, who could extend their stay in foster care beyond the age of 18. That is why, moreover, the second paragraph of the article specifies that not only minors, but also elderly persons are placed in foster care. Furthermore, regarding the definition of foster family, as set out in paragraph 3 of the article, it is the adults who have temporary responsibility for the upbringing, care, education and care of the minors or adults who live with them. Reference should also be made to paragraph 4, which stated that the competent bodies for the supervision of foster care were the Ministry of Education, Welfare and Social Security and the legal entities supervised by it. Finally, paragraph 5 of the article specified the obligation to train prospective foster parents and to set up a body of prospective foster parents (Government Gazette 158/A/21-9-1992).

One year later, the executive decree P.D.337/1993 was issued, which defined the individual terms and conditions that had to be met in order for a minor to be placed in a foster family, as well as the rights and obligations of each member, i.e. both the biological and foster family and the minor. In addition, reference was made to the temporary nature of the measure, and the obligation to educate the prospective foster parents was also specified, as were the obligations of the competent bodies supervising the foster placement. Finally, it regulated issues relating to facilities for foster parents, such as the allowance they would receive (Government Gazette A 144/02-09-1993). Even though this Presidential Decree is considered by many to have laid the foundations for the promotion of the institution of foster care, it was nevertheless heavily criticized, mainly regarding the removal of the minor from his/her biological family, without prior judicial review, as well as the number of rights recognized to foster parents (Peraki, 2018, Farmakopoulou, 2020).

Subsequently, reference should be made to Law 2447/1996, by which, on the one hand, the institution of the fostering of minors was incorporated into the Civil Code and, on the other hand, the first nine articles of the previous Presidential Decree, which had been criticized, were repealed. As far as the purpose of this law was concerned, it was twofold. On the one hand, to institutionalize state/social control of cases where actual care by a third party is required and, on the other hand, to ensure that strict judicial control would precede the removal of a minor from his/her biological family and placement in foster care. In this way, the legislator ensured that both the interests of the minor and family cohesion were safeguarded at the same time (Government Gazette A 278/30.12.1996). Similarly, the provisions





of the Civil Code 1655-1665 regulated the general principles of the institution of fostering (Triantos, 2015).

In broad strokes it could be said that with the law, as well as with the inclusion of the institution of fostering in the provisions of the Civil Code, an important step had been taken for the promotion and smooth implementation of the institution of fostering. This, however, does not seem to correspond adequately to the Greek reality, since although the law provided for the development and implementation of out-of-home policies for minors, both before and after their placement in a closed child protection institution, however, following the abolition of the Patriotic Foundation for Social Welfare and Perception (P.I.K.P.A.) and the National Welfare Agency (N.W.A.) in 1998-both the state and the child welfare institutions did not implement these policies. Consequently, for at least 25 years, the institution of foster care as an alternative form of child protection was not implemented in practice, and thus thousands of minors lived most or even all of their underage lives in an institution, either public or private. Exceptions were the "Mother" Baby Centre in Attica and some other Child Protection Agencies, which continued to promote foster care (Georgiadis, 2019).

In an effort to address the above-mentioned pathologies, several years later and specifically in 2009, the Executive Presidential Decree 86/2009 was issued, which on the one hand repealed the Executive Decree of 1993 in its entirety and on the other hand made improvements in the implementation of the institution of fostering. In particular, the law regulated individual issues relating to the conditions that must be met in order for a minor to be placed in foster care, the rights of foster parents, the obligation to attend accelerated training programs before assuming their role, the sanctions they would face if they did not perform this role properly and, finally, the obligations of the bodies responsible for supervising foster care (Government Gazette 114/A/16-7-2009).

Finally, amendments to the implementation of the institutions of fostering and adoption were introduced by the recent Law 4538/2018, which is still in force today and its provisions are mainly of an organizational nature (Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018). A more detailed reference to the philosophy and content of this law is made in a subsequent section of this paper.

#### **4. Types and Forms of Fostering**

The review of the literature shows that the fostering of a minor, whether it takes place at a private level or at the level of social welfare, constitutes a family-type relationship between the members, which can evolve according to their needs and capabilities (Georgarou, 2016). Considering the above, the following forms of fostering are distinguished.

With regard to the relationship between the minor and his or her foster parents, kinship and non-relative fostering is recognized. In many cases it is preferable for the minor's actual care to be taken by people from his or her extended family environment, with whom the minor has usually already developed emotional ties and with whom cohabitation is likely to be smoother. On the other hand, if it is not possible for a relative to take over the actual care of the minor, then the placement of the minor in a foster family, with whom the minor has not known in advance and with whom he or she has not developed ties, is preferable, following a social investigation.

Based on the length of stay in the foster family, is recognized as short-term, medium-term, long-term, residential, day care and emergency foster care.



Short-term fostering: usually lasts up to nine weeks (9) and is applied to infants and children who have been temporarily separated from their family due to a family crisis (death, mental or physical illness, unemployment). Where appropriate, fostering begins in this way and develops differently.

Medium-term fostering: in this type of fostering the fostering can last from a few months to two (2) years. The parent(s) are given time to deal with their problems while the child is in foster care to deal with their own problems. In some cases, it can develop into a long-term foster care placement.

Long-term fostering: this type of fostering lasts for many years or is permanent and is the most common type in our country. Even when children maintain contact with their biological parents, they cannot return to them. These are children whose parents refuse to consent to their adoption in the hope that one day their situation will change, and they will be able to claim them (e.g. prostitute mothers, abusive parents) or when the children are abandoned because they have some form of disability.

Foster care/relief: children living in institutions who go to foster families on days when school is not in session for the purpose of psychosocial and recreational development. (weekends, holidays, summers), (Synathi, 2012).

Emergency/emergency foster care: this refers to cases where the parents are detained for a short period of time or need to be hospitalized immediately or where the child has to be removed from his/her family immediately due to a specific emergency situation.

Daytime foster care: the child is cared for in a foster family at set times according to his/her needs, during the day or at night, in order to enhance the functionality of the family and to prevent a more permanent removal of the child.

However, it could be mentioned that long-term fostering, where the minor remains in foster care for years, tends to be more common. In contrast, there are not enough cases of short-term fostering, i.e. the placement of the minor in the foster family for a short period of time, ranging between a few months. Based on the type of contract that is drawn up, the contractual, judicial and professional forms of fostering are recognized (Georgarou, 2016). It is useful at this point to present these forms in more detail.

### **Conventional Fostering**

According to Article 1655 of the Civil Code, both the biological parents and the guardian may request the placement of the minor in a foster family, if they consider that this action will contribute to the minor's normal development and, in general, to safeguarding his/her best interests (Karakostas, 2011). In general, as mentioned above, it is preferable to place the minor in a related family environment, while if this is not possible, then the biological parents or the guardian are entitled to request the assistance of the body responsible for fostering, so that a suitable family environment can be found (Peraki, 2018).

As regards the persons who should be involved in the process of concluding a contractual form of fostering, according to the provisions of the Civil Code the following cases are recognized.

If the minor is a child born in marriage, in a civil partnership, or adopted by two spouses jointly, the agreement can be drawn up between the biological (or adoptive) parents and the third person. In fact, this applies even in cases where the parent is a minor. Whereas if the child has been born out of wedlock



and has not been recognized by his/her father, then the agreement is drawn up between the mother and the third person, while if the father has voluntarily recognized his/her child and continues to exercise parental authority over him/her, then he/she participates in the process of drawing up the agreement.

According to the existing provisions of the Civil Code, in cases of death, declaration of obsolescence or disqualification of one of the parents, the other parent may conclude an agreement with a third person for the placement of the minor in a foster family. If one parent is not able to exercise parental responsibility, for example because the court has decided to remove this status, then the agreement on contractual fostering is made between the other parent and the third person. However, the above does not apply in cases where the inability to exercise parental authority is temporary, for example due to the absence of the parent abroad, in which case it is considered necessary for the parent to be involved in the agreement. Divorce, annulment of marriage or termination of cohabitation: in cases of divorce, annulment of marriage or termination of cohabitation, even if one of the parents has parental responsibility, nevertheless both of them must participate in the contractual fostering agreement, since this institution is considered the core of parental responsibility (Karakostas, 2001).

### **Fostering by Court Order**

The placement of a minor in a foster family by court order takes place when the court decides that such an action is necessary to safeguard the minor's best interests and normal development. In particular, the above is provided for in cases where the biological parents are unable to satisfactorily exercise parental care, in whole or in part, and in cases where the guardian of the minor is either unable or impeded in the effective exercise of his or her duties related to ensuring the healthy physical and mental development of the minor (Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018).

Finally, it should be noted that the court decides the placement of a minor in a foster family when he/she is abandoned, orphaned, or abandoned by both parents, if he/she has been abused or neglected by his/her parents or other family members, as well as if he/she lives in a closed care institution (Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018).

### **Professional Fostering**

The recent law on fostering provides for professional fostering for the first time. In particular, the court has the possibility to place in professional foster care, minors who have some form of disability or serious mental disorder, if this has been deemed appropriate by the competent body or person conducting the social investigation (Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018).

Further, it should be noted that professional foster parents follow a specific treatment plan for the child that they offer foster care, which has been proposed by a team of scientists from the agency overseeing the foster care. Therefore, it is considered that these people provide the minor with professional services and for this reason they are paid a monthly salary and are also insured for sickness and pension (Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018). Finally, there is also a form of professional fostering that offers a short-term care. More specifically, according to the current legislation, in cases where a suitable foster parent cannot be found for a minor who has been removed from his/her family environment, then the court may decide to place him/her with a professional foster parent for a short period of time (Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018).





## **5. Features of Fostering**

The institution of fostering has certain characteristics, which concern the type of foster family, the relationships between its members, as well as the duration of fostering (Mallouchou et al., 2022). More specifically, regarding the type of foster family, the recent 4538/2018 law enabled other types of families, in addition to the classic one, to apply to take over the actual care of a minor. Thus, for example, this right is now given to same-sex and heterosexual couples who have entered a civil partnership, single-parent families, single persons, widows/widowers, and divorcees. This provision was made in order to increase the population of persons who can apply to become foster parents and thus promote the institution and reduce the number of minors living in closed care institutions (Seferides, 2022; Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018).

Further, with regard to the relations between the members of the foster family, it should be noted first of all that in some cases there are biological children of the foster parents, while there are cases without other minors in the family. The above may affect the course of the fostering process and, above all, its results, i.e. whether it will be positive or negative for the minor. Thus, for example, the existence of other biological children may have a positive effect on the socialization and mental well-being of the minor, while it may also have a negative effect, due to tensions that are likely to arise between the members. Furthermore, the existence or not of other biological children is also directly related to the behavior of the foster parents towards the minor, as well as to their parental profile. In particular, the lack of biological children may make foster parents more flexible regarding the fulfilment of the minor's wishes, which may not be the case if there are other biological children (Mallouchou et al., 2022; Orme & Buehler, 2004).

The above-mentioned types of duration of foster care directly affect its outcomes, especially in terms of the psycho-emotional and social development of the minor placed in the family. In particular, it is plausible that in cases of short-term and medium-term foster care, it is not possible to develop emotional ties between the minor and the family in which he or she has been placed, which negatively affects the development of his or her social skills, fosters emotional insecurity and mental distress, both in the minor and in the adults who have taken over his or her actual care. Therefore, it could be said that, in order for the minor to gain more benefits from his or her placement in foster care the long-term foster care should be preferred (Farmakopoulou, 2020).

Foster care aims to offer caring and supportive settings for individuals requiring assistance. Orme and Buehler (2001) found that foster family traits, like how parents raise children, family interactions, and community support, have a significant impact on the welfare of foster children. Negative peer interactions, property damage, and bullying in foster homes can affect the experiences of both foster children and foster caregivers (Barter & Lutman, 2015). Comprehending these intricacies and elements that lead to favorable results is essential for enhancing the welfare of individuals in care. Gamification in foster care settings can provide creative solutions to improve involvement, drive, and competency building in individuals under care. Research has shown that gamification strategies effectively encourage learning, collaboration, and cultivating positive behaviors in different situations (Antonopoulou et al., 2022b; Lee & Loo, 2021). Integrating gamified features into foster care programs can motivate individuals to engage in their growth, acquire crucial life skills, and cultivate positive relationships in the fostering setting. Gamification can enhance interactive and engaging experiences to foster learning, growth, and resilience in individuals in foster care (Antonopoulou et al., 2022a; Giannoulis et al., 2022b).



Moreover, implementing gamification in fostering can improve productivity, engagement, and collaboration (Gkintoni et al., 2024b). Fostering programs can utilize gamification principles to help individuals set and accomplish personal goals, enhance crucial skills, and cultivate a feeling of achievement and advancement (Antonopoulou et al., 2023). Gamification can enhance social interaction, teamwork, and problem-solving skills in individuals receiving care, creating a supportive and empowering environment that produces positive results (Gkintoni et al., 2022b). Integrating gamification elements can enhance dynamism, interactivity, and facilitation of personal growth and development in fostering environments. Ultimately, incorporating gamification elements into foster care settings can improve involvement, drive, and competency growth in those under care. Fostering programs can use gamification strategies to create interactive and rewarding experiences that encourage learning, collaboration, and positive behaviors (Antonopoulou et al., 2021; Antonopoulou et al., 2022b; Giannoulis et al., 2022a). Comprehending the distinct characteristics of foster care and the possible benefits of gamification can result in more efficient and captivating support systems for individuals in foster care, ultimately promoting their well-being and development.

## **6. Implementation of Fostering Institution in other European Countries**

The institution of fostering has been established and implemented by other European countries, each of which has developed its own system. In this section, a brief description of the main features of the fostering system applied in France, Germany, Denmark, Italy, and Ireland will be given. The reference to these countries was chosen because the system they apply has several differences compared to the corresponding system applied in Greece.

In France, according to the law, in order to apply for temporary care of a minor, a citizen must be over 25 years old, have a sufficient knowledge of the French language, have a room for the minor, and be physically and mentally healthy. If he/she meets the above criteria and receives a positive evaluation from the social worker, he/she must attend a 60-hour training course and then complete 240 hours of continuing education over a two-year period. Once the process is completed and he/she takes care of a minor, he/she receives a monthly allowance ranging from 950 to 1400 € for the minor, plus an additional 130 € for other needs. Consequently, in France, fostering has the character of paid work, which is why the adult receives insurance and a pension. Emergency or short-term fostering schemes are also recognized to cover any needs of the minors. Finally, note that the age limit for the foster child is specified at 21 years (Gabriel et al, 2013).

Germany is considered a pioneer in fostering, having introduced the institution of foster care in Europe in 1930. As regards the model it applies, it focuses on recording and analyzing the problems faced by those involved in the upbringing of the minor, namely the carers, the biological children of the foster parents, the biological family of the minor and the minor himself. Using the data from these analyses, they identify the problem areas, the difficulties experienced, and tasks performed by foster parents, how their daily lives are shaped, and the interventions they should design to address all the problems associated with fostering in terms of the foster child, birth, other family members, external interventions, and the lives of foster parents (Wolf, 2008).

On the other hand, in Denmark, it is worth mentioning the privileges and thus the incentives given to adults to take on the foster care of a minor. In particular, they are compensated both for covering the operating costs of the minor and for the time they spend caring for him or her. In addition, they receive



a daily payment for food and accommodation expenses, as well as clothing and birthday presents, for as long as the minor remains in foster care (Kjeldsen & Kjeldsen, 2010).

As far as Italy is concerned, it should first be mentioned that the institution of fostering is seen as a preventive measure and not as a priority for the protection of minors, mainly because of the reactions raised by institutional protection providers. Furthermore, the fostering procedure is relatively simple since there are no strict conditions regarding the type and status of the foster family. Thus, for example, married, unmarried, homosexual and even immigrants can become foster parents, provided they are permanent residents. They must also be able to ensure the education, upbringing, and emotional well-being of the minor, even though, for the duration of the foster care placement, they are under the supervision of the social services department. As regards their remuneration, it is estimated at euros 500 per month, which is allocated by the State to cover the minor's needs. Finally, it should be noted that fostering can last up to 24 months, but it is possible to extend it for a further 24 months. Thereafter, the minor may maintain ties and contacts with the foster family, however the relationship between them is automatically terminated (Migliorini et al, 2018).

Finally, in Ireland, there is a strong emphasis on financial support for foster parents and even an increase in the amount given every two weeks, based on the age and therefore the needs of the foster child. Also, in Ireland, unemployed people or those working part-time who are over 25 years of age, regardless of their ethnic, cultural or religious background, can apply to take on the temporary care of a minor, provided of course that they have a bedroom available for them and that they provide evidence of good mental and physical health (Irish Foster Care Association, 2023).

## **7. Implementation of Fostering Institution in Greece**

The previous section studied the way in which the institution of fostering has been organized and operates in five European countries and found that in most of the cases special emphasis is placed on providing privileges to motivate adults to take on the temporary care of a minor. In this section the fostering system developed in Greece is analyzed, focusing on its positive and negative aspects. More specifically, the purpose of the recent Law 4538/2018 on the promotion of the Institutions of foster care and adoption was to resolve practical issues that hindered the process, as well as to upgrade and improve the quality of both institutions (Peraki, 2018; Seferidis, 2022). Indeed, following the enactment of the above-mentioned law, the institution of children's fostering has become more widely known, which, although it has been recognized since the early 1990s, until recently was not understood and therefore not accepted by a large part of Greek society (Seferidis, 2022).

One of the main positive points of Law 4538/2018, that should be noted is its attempt to resolve practical and substantive issues that both foster families and prospective foster families must deal with. To this end, it provided for the extension of the rights of foster families, the reduction of bureaucracy, transparency in the procedures followed, as well as the reduction of delays for placement in foster care. In particular, it introduced mandatory support and 30 hours compulsory training for prospective foster parents, set deadlines and timetables for each of the stages of fostering, increased the age limits for those wishing to become foster carers, which were set from 25 to 75 years of age, while previously was ranged from 30-60 years of age, issued an allowance to cover the needs of foster children and finally introduced the use of electronic registers of foster care children's and foster care parents to enhance transparency in the process. These measures are instrumental in promoting the institution of fostering

and in de-institutionalizing minors who have been removed from their biological family ([hellenicparliament.gr](http://hellenicparliament.gr), 2018).

Despite the positive prospects that emerge from the enactment of this law, however, both practitioners and prospective foster carers argue that to this day, there are still some delaying factors that need to be addressed, as well as some wrong attitudes that need to be changed in order to implement in practice the model of de-institutionalization of minors and to promote the child-centered nature of fostering. For example, it is considered necessary to immediately address the issue of understaffing of Child Protection Structures and social services operating in the country's regions, as well as the recruitment of specialized scientific personnel, in order to promote the interests of minors who have been removed from their biological family. A further disadvantage of the current legislation on the fostering of minors is that the state tends to equate the institution of fostering with that of adoption, which is evident from the fact that it asks foster families to take care of minors at their own expense, providing them with minimal facilities and limited social and labour rights. However, this discourages adults from requesting to take over the temporary care of a minor. Also, both prospective and foster parents know that at any time they may be asked by the competent authorities to hand over the minor to either his/her biological or adoptive family, which causes negative feelings, and also discourages them from applying for fostering, fearing that they will invest emotionally in the minor and then have to separate him/her. Finally, a basic problem related to the institution of foster care that should be addressed immediately is that minors who are accommodated in non-profit legal entities under private law are not systematically recorded. This fact results in the fact that the exact number of minors who can be placed in foster or adoptive care is not known and consequently the goal of deinstitutionalization is not achieved (Baltsioti & Farmakopoulou, 2023).

In Greece, the General Secretariat of Welfare, which is part of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, is responsible for the regulation of issues related to Child Protection, such as the development of the legislative and institutional framework and the design of Child Protection programs. In general, Child Protection includes institutional care of unprotected minors, Child Protection Programs in the form of Foster Care and finally Child Protection Programs in the form of Adoption (Robokou-Karagianni, 2007). Considering the above, it is understood that the institution of foster care is de facto and by law included in the Child Protection Framework. In this section, therefore, a brief reference will be made to the content of the concept of Child Protection in order to establish the way in which it is linked to the Institution of foster care.

More specifically, the concept of Child Protection refers to targeted interventions designed and implemented to remove minors from the risk of abuse, neglect, or harm that they may face in their family or wider social environment. These interventions involve both social workers and other professionals from the health and education sectors. Furthermore, the particularly important role of the social worker in all actions implemented in the field of child protection should be emphasized. For example, they investigate and assess the risk of child abuse, coordinate procedures to improve the environment in which children live, monitor the progress of each case and report the perpetrator if the preventive measures taken have failed. They also monitor the juvenile's family, settling practical issues, such as financial support and referral to a family therapist, in order to improve their living conditions. In addition, the role of the social worker is important in cases where a minor is removed from his/her family environment. In particular, he or she should immediately regulate issues relating to his or her temporary custody and placement in a foster family or in a special emergency accommodation facility. It should also inform and prepare the child appropriately, according to his or her age and level of maturity, for the situation he or she is experiencing. Finally, it should draw up an individualized plan



for the long-term placement of the minor either in a foster or adoptive family or in small family-like structures, always with the best interests of the minor in mind (Kandylaki, 2008; Farmakopoulou, 2022).

Based on the above, it is clear that the institution of foster care is part of the child protection system in Greece, since the foster family cooperates closely with the social worker in order to achieve the basic goal set by the Child Protection Framework, namely, to ensure a healthy family environment and consequently a good quality of life for the minor (Oikonomou et al., 2024).

### **Relevant Organizations Implementing the Institution of Fostering in Greece**

For achieving effective implementation of the institution of fostering, it is necessary to have State organizations that will regulate and supervise the overall procedure and the individual issues, such as the submission of applications and supporting documents of prospective foster parents, as well as the investigation of their suitability. In accordance with the legislation in force, the organizations responsible for the implementation of the institution of fostering are the following:

- a) *The Social Welfare Centers of the Regions*, which are part of the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Social Solidarity and have minors under their protection.
- b) *The Social Welfare Directorates of the Regions*, which are responsible for minors whose guardianship has been entrusted to non-profit legal entities governed by private law.
- c) *Municipal nurseries*, which have minors under their care.
- d) *The Social Services of the Juvenile Protection Companies* that are part of the Ministry of Justice and are responsible for minors (Government Gazette A' 85/16.5.2018).

## **8. The Benefits of Fostering**

Foster care is preferred over residential care because minors receive several benefits, which are primarily psycho-emotional, social and developmental. However, it should be noted that, in order to reap these benefits, minors must be placed in foster homes that are actually willing to take on the role of their temporary care. More specifically, regarding the psycho-emotional benefits that a minor can gain from being placed in a foster family, it is first of all the emotional stability and security that he/she may not have been able to develop while remaining with his/her biological family, given that he/she had to be removed from it. It should be noted at this point that emotional stability and security are particularly crucial for the normal development of the minor and for the establishment of healthy relationships with the people around him throughout his life (Smyke et al., 2010).

In addition, it should not be overlooked that every human being, both adults and minors, needs to experience feelings of love, acceptance and understanding to be mentally and emotionally healthy. Considering the fact that the majority of families who apply for temporary care of a minor have reserves of love and wish to support him/her, it is understandable that he/she will indeed experience these feelings and benefit in many ways. Furthermore, the minor placed in foster care is expected to reap social benefits, as he/she will be given the opportunity to interact with a number of people, adults and





minors, whom he/she did not know before and - if he/she feels safe - will be able to develop social skills, which are clearly necessary throughout his/her life (Orme & Buehler, 2004).

Finally, by being placed in foster care, the minor can ensure his/her good physical health and the development of his/her knowledge and skills. This is why the state provides the necessary support to the foster family, so that it can meet the fundamental needs of the minor, in terms of health care and education (Hellenic parliament.gr, 2018).

## **9. Risk Factors of Fostering**

Even though, as stated in the previous section, the placement of a minor in a foster family is beneficial for him/her, since it can ensure a smooth social and psycho-emotional development, however, the literature points out certain risk factors that may negatively affect the course of foster care. These factors can be divided into three broad categories, those related to professional intervention, to the foster family and to the characteristics of the minor (Gotsi et al., 2020).

More specifically, the factors related to professional intervention are the following:

- a) The non-qualified training of professionals involved in the institution of fostering,
- b) The failure to adequately assess the suitability of prospective parent sponsors.
- c) The erroneous conclusions about matching prospective foster parents and the minor.
- d) The discrepancy between the characteristics of the desired minor and the minor proposed for foster care.
- e) Inadequate preparation of the minor by the social worker
- f) The absence of support for the family and the minor after fostering.

In addition, the factors related to the family, which may negatively affect the course of fostering, are also identified. These are the following factors:

- a) Placement in a single-parent family.
- b) Existing biological children.
- c) The lack of agreement between the couple on the prospect of fostering.
- d) The strict and inflexible way of raising minors.
- e) Excessive expectations of Foster Parents.
- f) The emotional attachment difficulties that adults face.
- g) Limited support from the social network.

Finally, factors related to the minor that may negatively affect the course of fostering are the following:

- a) Previous experience of abuse and neglect.
- b) The old age at the time of fostering, i.e. when the minor is over six years old and has already formed the basic characteristics of his personality.
- c) A short stay in a closed care home before placement in foster care.
- d) The existence of serious behavioral problems.
- e) The emotional attachment difficulties the minor is experiencing.
- f) The recurring experience of returning to the institution (Gotsi et al., 2020).

Furthermore, fostering entails offering care and assistance to vulnerable individuals, frequently children who have undergone trauma. Studies have pinpointed different risk factors linked to fostering and trauma. Research has shown that children in foster care are susceptible to emotional and behavioral challenges, compromised neurobiological growth, and social relationship difficulties, which can heighten their likelihood of facing trauma. Leve et al. (2012). Risk factors such as placement instability, poor foster parenting quality, and exposure to chronic trauma can affect the well-being of children in foster care (Konijn et al., 2019; Storey & Fletcher, 2022). Comprehending these risk factors is essential for creating efficient interventions and support systems for individuals in foster care. Children in foster care who experience trauma may face various difficulties, such as post-traumatic stress symptoms, emotional challenges, and behavioral issues (Gkintoni et al., 2024a; Koutsopoulou et al., 2024). Research indicates that trauma symptoms can be impacted by placement experiences and the quality of the foster family environment (Teculeasa et al., 2022; Vasileva & Petermann, 2017).

To tackle trauma-related issues in foster care, it is essential to have a thorough grasp of the risk factors and protective factors that impact the welfare of individuals in care (Gkintoni et al., 2024a). Foster carers are significantly affected by trauma. Foster carers may develop secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout because of being exposed to children's traumatic experiences. It is crucial to comprehend how trauma exposure affects foster carers to offer them the required assistance and strategies to avoid burnout and enhance their well-being (Hannah & Woolgar, 2018). To create a more supportive and trauma-informed environment for individuals in foster care, it is essential to address risk factors such as instability in placements, exposure to chronic trauma, and the impact on foster carers.

To support individuals who have gone through trauma, it is essential to have a profound comprehension of the risk factors that can affect their well-being (Gkintoni et al., 2024b). Identifying and addressing risk factors like placement instability, chronic trauma exposure, and challenges for foster carers can help establish a more nurturing and supportive environment for individuals in foster care. Utilizing evidence-based interventions and trauma-informed practices can reduce the effects of trauma and enhance resilience in individuals receiving care.

## **10. Child Guarantee**

One of the primary objectives of the organizations and institutions dealing with childcare issues is to ensure quality living conditions and to combat all risks and problems that may hinder the normal development of minors. Besides, this is the central axis of all institutional texts that refer to children's rights, such as the United Nations Convention, as well as the existing European legislation (Balias, 2011; Fassoulis, 2015). However, it should be noted that this goal is difficult to achieve, especially in modern times, given the prevailing social and economic conditions that hamper the daily lives of millions of people - regardless of age - in most countries of the world (Aliprantis, 2022). In this context, minors are confronted daily with serious problems and risks that negatively affect their psychology and their development in general. Indicatively, phenomena such as poverty, malnutrition, abuse, domestic violence, exclusion from education and even diseases that afflict children, which in many cases could have been prevented if appropriate prevention policies were followed (Pefkoula, 2014).

UNICEF, in cooperation with the European Commission, is trying to reduce these risks. To this end, they have designed a program called 'Child Guarantee' - or 'guarantee for children', as the Greek term

is used - the aim of which is to ensure that minors do not face the problems of poverty and exclusion, but instead have unhindered access to all educational, health and social services and thus grow up safely. It should be noted at this point that the focus is primarily on specific categories of minors, such as, for example, migrants, refugees, Roma, those with some form of disability or disorder, and those living in institutions. In particular, the interventions implemented by the program are designed by UNICEF and the European Commission, in cooperation with national authorities, civil society organizations, minors and young people. This ensures that the interventions designed are effective in achieving their key objective of reducing the impact of poverty and social exclusion on minors. At the time of writing this paper, the Child Guarantee project is in its third phase and five European countries are participating in it: Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Spain, Germany and Italy. These countries are implementing innovative approaches so that their national authorities can provide care, support and necessary educational and health services to minors in need and their families. The aim of national authorities should be to ensure that no minor lives in conditions of deprivation of basic goods such as food, housing and health care (Unicef.org, 2023).

Finally, it is useful to make a reference to the way the Child Guarantee program works in Greece. In particular, it should be noted that, for the design and implementation of the actions, the Programmer's Steering Committee cooperates with representatives of the relevant government agencies, as well as with independent bodies specializing in child protection, youth employment, education, social inclusion and poverty reduction. Together, these bodies design integrated actions and strategies, which are in line with national objectives and are based on the following six pillars of the program:

- a) De-institutionalization and care of minors at the community level.
- b) Promoting the system of Admission.
- c) Supported independent living for adolescents to help them make a smooth transition to adulthood.
- d) Cultivating life skills and enhancing work readiness for young people from vulnerable groups.
- e) Inclusive education for all school-age children.
- f) Conduct research on child poverty and social inclusion to support national strategies designed in this direction (Unicef.org, 2023).

Therefore, the Child Guarantee program is directly intertwined with the institutions of Reception and social protection, which are studied in the context of this research project. In particular, the main objective of the program is to ensure that minors are gradually removed from the institutions in which they are accommodated and enjoy all their rights so that they can enjoy a quality living environment. It is considered that this objective can be achieved, since the design and implementation of the actions involves the cooperation of many institutions and persons with knowledge of child protection.

## **11. Discussion and Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has highlighted the multifaceted and evolving nature of the fostering framework in Greece, emphasizing the psycho-emotional, social, and cognitive benefits for minors in care while addressing the significant challenges that persist. While fostering in Greece has seen improvements with legislative advancements, particularly since the early 1990s, there remain critical issues such as bureaucratic hurdles, legislative inefficiencies, and lack of comprehensive support for foster families and children.

Through comparative analysis and extensive literature review, this paper underscores the necessity for holistic approaches that incorporate the perspectives of children, foster parents, and professionals within the child protection system. It brings to light the essential role of empathetic, empowering environments and the importance of addressing the negative factors that can impact fostering outcomes, such as professional intervention styles and the characteristics of both the foster families and minors involved. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the potential of initiatives like the Child Guarantee program to mitigate the effects of poverty and social exclusion on minors, urging further research into its efficacy. It advocates for continuous improvement of professional training, foster family recruitment, and long-term support mechanisms, recognizing the importance of fostering in the broader scope of child welfare and protection.

The wealth of referenced research also points to the necessity for ongoing study into the dynamics of foster care, the mental health of children, and the motivations and stresses experienced by fostering families. With growth and innovation in educational neuroscience and a marked focus on the rights and well-being of the child, the paper calls for policy revisions and more substantial evidence-based interventions. Thus, the research clearly asserts the significance of evolving the fostering system in Greece to better serve the developmental needs of minors in care, ultimately fostering (pun intended) a more nurturing and supportive environment for the children and families involved in this critical aspect of child welfare.

Future work emanating from this research could delve deeper into the evaluation of existing legislative reforms and the practical outcomes for children, particularly focusing on the efficiency and effectiveness of support structures for foster families. It would be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies to track the long-term progress of children in various fostering arrangements and the impact on their mental health and social integration. Another prospective area of research could involve the examination of strategies that minimize the stress experienced by foster parents, as highlighted by Goemans et al. (2020), which may, in turn, foster a more stable and nurturing environment for the foster children.

The limitations present in this body of research include the potential sample bias, where the experiences of foster families and children in Greece may not be fully representative of those in different sociocultural contexts. Additionally, it is crucial in future studies to address the lack of comprehensive data concerning the psychosocial outcomes for children in foster care and the performance of the Child Guarantee program. Additionally, the methodologies to evaluate the gamification tools in education, as mentioned in educational research, need to be validated in the context of child protection. Furthermore, considering the complexity of the Greek fostering system, future research must strive to employ robust, culturally sensitive, and multi-disciplinary approaches to fully comprehend the intricate dynamics at play.

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## **Legislation**

- [1] Official Journal of the European Communities 2000/ C 364/1. Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.
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