Foster Families: A Practical Understanding

Interdisciplinary Foundations for Families and Professionals

Foster Families: A Practical Understanding

Interdisciplinary Foundations for Families and Professionals

Author: Ivan Esco

© 2026 Ivan Esco (Ivan Escobartirado)
All rights reserved.
ISBN: 9789403924779
First edition
Independent Academic Publication.
Design and Layout: Ivan Esco
ivanesco.personal@gmail.com

Independent academic publication, produced with the author's own resources and free from institutional influence or constraints.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author.

Printed on demand.
Sustainability recommendation:
Choose the digital edition to help reduce paper consumption.

Dedication

To my mother:

Because her family history, shaped by painful and inhumane experiences, reminds me that being born into a family does not, in itself, guarantee the existence of a true home. Family ties do not always provide protection, affection, or guidance. Every child deserves to grow up in an environment where love, ethics, respect, and stability form the foundation of their development, for there is no greater advantage in human development than a home capable of offering safety, dignity, and hope.

And to my father:

Because he has been the bearer of the love, ethical values, and principles passed down by my exemplary grandfather. As a loving father, a man of integrity, wise in his guidance and generous through his example, he has shown me that true authority is rooted in affection, respect, and the consistency between one's words and actions. Growing up under his guidance has been one of the greatest privileges of my life. It is my sincere hope that others may experience this same privilege—whether through their biological family or through the invaluable social opportunity of being welcomed into the care of loving human beings.

Preface

Foster care is one of the principal child protection strategies for children and adolescents who, for a variety of reasons, are temporarily unable to remain with their families of origin. Although its implementation has expanded considerably across many countries over recent decades, foster care continues to present a complex field in which social, legal, psychological, educational, health, and administrative challenges converge—challenges that are often addressed in isolation rather than through an integrated approach.

The increasing complexity of the circumstances affecting children underscores the need to understand foster care from a broad, multidisciplinary perspective. The consequences of abandonment, abuse, neglect, family crises, migration, poverty, and other forms of vulnerability require responses grounded in both scientific evidence and practical experience. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature tends to focus on a single discipline or on specific stages of the foster care process, making it difficult to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

This book was conceived as a foundational guide in response to that need. Its purpose is to bring together the principal scientific contributions to the field of foster care within a single volume and to complement them with practical guidance for those directly involved in these processes. It is not intended to replace the specialized literature of each discipline, but rather to integrate their most significant contributions into a coherent, interdisciplinary, and practice-oriented framework.

The value of this work lies in its integration of knowledge drawn from the social sciences, psychology, education, law, health sciences, economics, public administration, philosophy, ethics, and scientific research with practical tools designed to support the everyday realities of foster care. This interdisciplinary approach enables readers to understand the phenomenon from multiple perspectives while translating theoretical knowledge into practical applications for children, foster families, institutions, and professionals.

The primary objective of this book is to provide a solid foundation for understanding foster care in all its dimensions, to support evidence-informed decision-making, and to contribute to the strengthening of child protection programs. It is intended to serve as a valuable resource for researchers, students, professionals across multiple disciplines, policymakers, social organizations, and families interested in understanding or participating in foster care systems.

The approach adopted throughout this book is explicitly interdisciplinary. Each discipline contributes concepts, methodologies, and analytical tools that illuminate particular aspects of foster care; however, it is the integration of these perspectives

that provides the most complete understanding of this complex reality. Grounded in scientific evidence and critical analysis, the book combines theoretical knowledge with practical experience and evidence-based guidance to facilitate the application of its content across diverse professional and cultural contexts.

This work is intended primarily for child protection professionals, social workers, psychologists, educators, attorneys, healthcare professionals, policymakers, researchers, social entrepreneurs, and university students. It may also be of interest to foster families, community organizations, and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the functioning, significance, and challenges of foster care.

The content examines foster care from its conceptual foundations through its practical implementation. It includes an interdisciplinary analysis of the field, an exploration of child development, guidance on the preparation of foster families, everyday family life within foster placements, relationships with families of origin, collaboration with institutions, and the conclusion of foster care placements. Rather than providing an exhaustive treatment of the clinical, legal, or administrative dimensions specific to each discipline, the book offers an integrated perspective designed to facilitate both understanding and practical application.

The organization of the book reflects this interdisciplinary philosophy. The first part examines foster care through the lens of multiple fields of knowledge, illustrating how each contributes to a richer understanding of the phenomenon. The second part translates this knowledge into practice by presenting common scenarios, intervention strategies, and practical guidance for each stage of the foster care process—from initial preparation through placement and, ultimately, to the conclusion of care.

Foster care continues to evolve alongside advances in scientific research, public policy, and professional practice. Accordingly, this book does not seek to provide definitive answers; rather, it offers a conceptual framework intended to promote critical analysis, continuous learning, and ongoing improvement. Its greatest aspiration is to contribute to strengthening foster care practice through evidence-based knowledge, interdisciplinary collaboration, and an unwavering commitment to the best interests of the child, while inspiring new questions, further research, and more effective ways of protecting those who need it most.

Table of Contents

Introduction 25

Chapter 1. Analysis from the Social Sciences 29

Interdisciplinary Foundations for Understanding Foster Families through Sociology and Social Work 29

1.1 The Social Sciences Perspective on Foster Families 30

1.2 Sociology and Foster Families 31

1.3 Social Work and Foster Families 33

1.3.1 Scope of Practice and Professional Responsibility 33

1.3.3 Early Intervention and Prevention 34

1.3.4 The Selection and Preparation of Foster Families 35

1.3.5 Ongoing Support and Continuous Monitoring 36

1.3.6 Interagency Collaboration 36

1.3.7 The Ethical Dimension of Social Work 36

1.4 Anthropology and Foster Families 37

1.4.1 Kinship as a Social Construction 38

1.4.2 Culture, Parenting, and Child Care 38

1.4.3 Cultural Competence within the Child Protection System 39

1.4.4 Cultural Identity During Foster Care 39

1.5 Family Studies and Foster Families 40

1.5.1 The Social Functions of the Family 40

1.5.2 The Family as a Relational System 41

1.5.3 Continuity and Stability 41

1.6 Childhood Studies and Foster Families 41

1.6.1 The Child as a Social Actor 42

1.6.2 Continuity of Personal History 42

1.6.3 Participation and Decision-Making 43

1.7 Gender Studies and Foster Families 43

1.8 Migration and Human Mobility 44

1.9 Intercultural Studies 45

1.10 Diversity and Inclusion 45

1.11 Poverty and Social Exclusion 46
Chapter 2. Analysis from Psychology and the Behavioral Sciences . 49
Understanding Development, Adaptation, and Psychological Well-Being in Foster Families 49
2.1 Psychology as a Foundation for Understanding Foster Families 50
2.1.1 The Ecological Perspective on Human Development 51
2.1.2 The Importance of Psychological Stability 52
2.2 Developmental Psychology and Foster Families 52
2.2.1 Development During Early Childhood 53
2.2.2 Development During Middle Childhood and Adolescence 53
2.2.3 Clinical Psychology and Foster Families 53
2.3.1 Comprehensive Clinical Assessment 54
2.3.2 Understanding Behavior Through Its Function 54
2.3.3 Evidence-Based Psychological Intervention 55
2.4 Neuropsychology and Foster Families 55
2.4.1 Cognitive Functions and Adaptation 56
2.4.2 Neuropsychological Assessment 56
2.4.3 The Importance of Avoiding Overdiagnosis 56
2.5 Neurodevelopment and Foster Families 57
2.5.1 Brain Development and Early Experiences 57
2.5.2 Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Foster Care 57
2.5.3 Early Intervention as a Principle of the Swedish Welfare System 58
2.6 Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in the Context of Foster Families 58
2.6.1 Children's Mental Health and Experiences of Adversity 59
2.6.2 Comprehensive Psychiatric Assessment 59
2.6.3 Common Mental Health Conditions Among Children Receiving Protective Care 60
2.6.4 Treatment and Interdisciplinary Coordination 60
2.7 Resilience: Adaptation and Recovery Following Adversity 61
2.7.1 Individual Protective Factors 61
2.7.2 The Role of Meaningful Relationships 62
2.7.3 Resilience and the Welfare System 62
2.8 Trauma and Psychological Recovery 62

2.8.1 Trauma and Early Adverse Experiences 63
2.8.2 Complex Trauma 63
2.8.3 Recovery and Healing 63
2.9 Attachment and Emotional Bonds in Foster Families 64
2.9.1 Attachment as a Developmental Process 64
2.9.2 Attachment, Trauma, and Emotional Regulation 65
2.9.3 Attachment and Contact with the Biological Family 66
2.10 Family Therapy and Relational Processes in Foster Care 66
2.10.1 The Foster Family as a Dynamic System 67
2.10.2 The Biological Family Within the Therapeutic Process 67
2.11 Family Communication and the Construction of Emotional Well-Being 68
2.11.1 Trauma-Informed Communication 68
2.11.2 Communicating About Personal History 69
2.12 Integrating Psychology into the Swedish Foster Care System 69
Chapter 3. Analysis Through Theories of Education and Human Development 71
Education, Learning, and the Creation of Opportunities in Foster Families: Education as an Essential Dimension of Family Foster Care 71
3.1. Pedagogy: Understanding Education as a Process of Holistic Development 72
3.1.1. The Evolution of Pedagogical Models: From Passive Recipient to Active Learner 73
3.1.2. Education, Emotional Security, and Learning 73
3.1.3. Pedagogy Centered on the Child's Holistic Development 74
3.1.4. The Pedagogical Role of Foster Families 75
3.2. Inclusive Education: Responding to Diversity and Ensuring Educational Opportunities for All Children 75
3.2.1. Historical Development: From Exclusion to Inclusive Education 76
3.2.2. Distinguishing Equality, Equity, and Inclusion 76
3.2.3. Inclusive Education and Children in Foster Families 77
3.2.4. Educational Barriers Associated with Childhood Vulnerability 78
3.2.5. Universal Design for Learning and Personalized Education 79
3.2.6. The Teacher's Role as an Agent of Inclusion 79

3.2.7. The Swedish Model of Inclusive Education and Child Protection.... 80
3.3. Human Development: Education, Capabilities, and the Creation of Opportunities for Children Under Protection 80
3.3.1. From Economic Development to Human Development..... 81
3.3.2. The Capabilities Approach: Education as the Expansion of Opportunities..... 82
3.3.3. Martha Nussbaum's Contributions: Dignity and Holistic Development 83
3.3.4. Childhood and Human Development: A Life Course Perspective ... 83
3.3.5. Education and Social Mobility 84
3.3.6. Human Development and Children's Rights..... 84
3.3.7. Human Development in the Swedish Child Welfare Model..... 85
3.3.8. The Foster Family as a Space for Human Development 85
3.4. Interdisciplinary Integration: Education, Child Protection, and Holistic Development in Foster Families 86
3.4.1. The Relationship Among Pedagogy, Psychology, and Social Work .. 87
3.4.2. The School as a Protective Institution..... 87
3.4.3. Preventing School Failure Among Children Under Protection..... 88
3.4.4. Coordination Among Foster Families, Schools, and Social Services. 88
3.4.5. Children's Participation as an Educational and Protective Principle. 89
3.4.6. Implications for Foster Families..... 89
3.4.7. Implications for Professionals and Public Policymakers 90
Chapter 4. Analysis Through Law, Protection, and Justice 91
Rights, Child Protection, and Intervention Mechanisms in Foster Families Foster Care as a Measure to Safeguard Children's Rights 91
4.1. Children's Rights Law 91
4.2. Human Rights and Child Protection 92
4.3. Child Protection 93
4.4. Criminology and Foster Families 93
4.5. Victimology and Experiences of Harm in Childhood 94
4.6. Family Mediation and Conflict Resolution..... 95
Chapter 5. A Perspective from Health and Biomedical Sciences..... 97
5.1. Child Health as the Foundation of the Protection System 98
5.2. Pediatric Medicine in the Context of Foster Care 99

5.3. The Pediatrician as a Member of the Interdisciplinary Team 100
5.4. Public Health as a Pillar of Child Protection 101
5.5. The Social Determinants of Health and Their Impact on Foster Care .. 102
5.6. Health Promotion and Prevention in the Swedish System..... 103
5.7. Coordination Among the Healthcare System, Socialtjänsten, and the Educational Sector 104
5.8. Public Health as a Tool for Reducing Inequalities..... 105
5.9. Disability and Rehabilitation in the Context of Foster Care 105
5.10. Rehabilitation as an Interdisciplinary Process 106
5.11. Caring for Children with Disabilities in Foster Families 107
5.12. Current Challenges in the Biomedical Sciences Applied to Foster Care 108
Chapter 6. A Perspective from Economics, Public Administration, and Management..... 111
6.1. Social Economy as a Framework for Understanding Child Protection . 112
6.2. Welfare Economics: Foundations for Investing in Childhood..... 113
6.3. Child Well-Being as a Strategic Social Investment..... 114
6.4. The Nordic Model and the Economic Rationale of Foster Care 115
6.5. Public Administration as the Institutional Foundation of the Foster Care System 116
6.6. Governance of the Swedish Child Protection System..... 117
6.7. The Role of the Socialtjänsten and Municipalities in the Management of Foster Care 118
6.8. Program Evaluation as a Tool for Continuous Improvement..... 119
6.9. Quality Indicators and the Use of Evidence in Decision-Making..... 120
6.10. Leadership and Management of Social Services Within the Foster Care System 120
6.11. Competencies for Leading Child Protection Services..... 121
6.12. Interdisciplinary Management of Foster Families..... 122
6.13. Innovation, Continuous Improvement, and System Sustainability..... 123
Chapter 7. An Analysis from the Perspective of Social Welfare and Public Policy 127
7.1. Social Welfare as the Foundation of Child Protection..... 128

7.2. The Swedish Welfare State and Its Historical Development.....129
7.3. Child Well-Being as the Central Objective of Public Policy.....130
7.4. Adoption and Foster Care: Two Institutions with Distinct Purposes 130
7.5. Foster Care (Familjehem) as an Instrument of Social Welfare.....132
7.6. The Role of the Socialtjänsten in Child Protection.....133
7.7. Residential Care Homes (HVB) Within the Child Protection System 133
7.8. Early Intervention as a Guiding Principle 134
7.9. International Cooperation and Development: A Strategic Dimension of Child Protection.....135
7.10. The Role of International Organizations.....136
7.11. Nordic Cooperation as a Platform for Institutional Learning.....137
7.12. Social Equity and Equal Opportunities.....137
7.13. Social Inclusion and Community Participation.....138
7.14. Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions for Welfare Policy ..139
Chapter 8. A Psychological Perspective on Foster Families 141
8.1. Developmental Psychology and Child Protection.....142
8.2. Attachment Theory and Foster Care.....142
8.3. Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences 143
8.4. Resilience and Positive Adaptation.....144
8.5. Emotional Development in Foster Care.....145
8.6. Child Mental Health in Foster Care.....146
8.7. Identity Development and Sense of Belonging 147
8.8. Psychological Assessment in Child Protection 148
8.9. Cognitive Development and Learning 149
8.10. Social Development and Interpersonal Relationships.....150
8.11. Psychological Support for Foster Families.....151
8.12. Contemporary Psychological Challenges and Future Directions.....152
Chapter 9. A Perspective on Research and Scientific Evaluation ...153
9.1. Scientific Research as the Foundation of Child Protection 154
9.2. Foster Care Research in Sweden and the Nordic Countries.....155
9.3. Statistics Applied to the Social Sciences.....156
9.4. Fundamental Concepts for Interpreting Scientific Evidence 157

9.5. Data Quality and Research Validity 157
9.6. Evaluating Social Programs as a Tool for Continuous Improvement 158
9.7. Designing Foster Care Programs from an Evidence-Based Perspective 159
9.8. Indicators of Effectiveness, Efficiency, Quality, and Equity 160
9.9. Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in Foster Care Evaluation 161
9.10. Longitudinal Research and Outcome Monitoring 162
9.11. Interdisciplinary Research in Child Protection 163
9.12. Administrative Records, Methodological Innovation, and Open Science 164
9.13. Methodological Limitations and Challenges in Foster Care Research . 165
9.14. Research as a Foundation for Decision-Making within the Socialtjänsten 166
Chapter 10. Life Course Perspectives 169
10.1. The Life Course Perspective and Its Importance for Understanding Foster Care 170
10.2. Human Development: Conceptual Foundations 171
10.3. Major Theories of Human Development and Their Application to Foster Care 172
10.4. Physical, Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Development During Childhood and Adolescence 173
10.5. Human Development During Adulthood and the Continuity of the Life Course 174
10.6. The Transition to Adulthood for Young People Leaving Foster Care 175
10.7. Protective and Risk Factors Across the Life Course 176
10.9. Gerontology: Foundations and Development as a Scientific Discipline 178
10.10. Intergenerational Relationships and Their Contribution to Foster Care 178
10.11. Population Aging and Challenges for the Swedish Welfare System ... 180
10.12. The Contribution of Gerontology to Foster Care Policies 181
10.13. Integrating the Life Course Perspective into Contemporary Child Protection Policies 182
11.1. History and Evolution of Foster Care 186
11.1.2. What Is a Foster Family? 190

11.1.3. Story: The Phone Call That Changed Our Lives 192
Chapter 12. Understanding the Child 197
12.1. Who Are the Children Who Enter the Child Protection System? 198
12.2. Child Development and the Impact of Neglect 201
12.3. Story: The First Night at Home 205
12.4. Why Do Some Children Reject Affection? 209
Chapter 13. Preparing to Become a Foster Family 211
13.1. Preparing the Foster Family 212
13.2. Are We Truly Prepared? 215
13.3. Story: Our Children Were Afraid Too 219
13.4. How to Prepare Biological Children and the Extended Family 222
Chapter 14. Arrival at the Foster Home 227
14.1. The Child's Arrival at the Foster Home 227
14.2. The First 24 Hours: What to Do and What to Avoid 230
14.3. Story: He Arrived with a Bag of Clothes and No Trust 234
14.4. The First Ninety Days: Building Security Before Obedience 237
14.5. The First Ninety Days: Building Safety Before Compliance 241
Chapter 15. Building a Temporary Family 247
15.1. Daily Life and the Development of Attachment 247
15.2. Why Do Some Children Reject Affection? 250
15.3. How Can Boundaries Be Established Without Re-Traumatizing the Child? 254
15.4. Story: She Never Called Me Mom... and That Was Okay 257
15.5. Routines That Promote Healing 259
Chapter 16. When Difficulties Arise 263
16.1. Understanding Challenging Behaviors in Foster Care 263
16.1.1. Behavior as the Expression of a Personal History 264
16.1.2. The Importance of Not Interpreting Behaviors as Personal Attacks 265
16.1.3. Challenging Behaviors and Intervention Strategies 265
16.2. Why Do Children Lie? 267
16.2.1. Lying as a Protective Mechanism 268
16.2.2. When Lying Becomes a Way of Controlling the Environment 269

16.2.3. Responding to Lying Without Undermining Trust 269
16.2.4. The Adult's Role: Building a Culture of Safety 270
16.3. Why Do Children Steal or Hoard Food? 270
16.3.1. The Difference Between Physical Hunger and Emotional Insecurity 271
16.3.2. Food as a Means of Regaining Control 272
16.3.3. How Foster Families Should Respond 272
16.3.4. Avoiding Shame as an Educational Strategy 273
16.3.5. When the Behavior Persists 273
16.3.6. Gradually Building a Sense of Security 274
16.4. Why Do Children Break Objects? 274
16.4.1. Difficulty Regulating Intense Emotions 275
16.4.2. When Destruction Represents a Sense of Control 275
16.4.3. The Difference Between Emotional Expression and Intentional Aggression 276
16.4.4. What to Do When Destructive Behavior Occurs 277
16.4.5. Case Example: The Day He Destroyed His Entire Room 277
16.5. Why Do Children Become Aggressive Toward Other Children? 279
16.5.1. Aggression as a Defensive Response 280
16.5.2. When Aggression Becomes a Form of Communication 280
16.5.3. The Importance of Protecting All Children 281
16.5.4. Intervention Following an Aggressive Incident 282
16.6. Practical Tools for Intervening Without Punishing Trauma 282
16.6.1. Supporting the Adult During Times of Crisis 283
Chapter 17. Life Beyond the Home 285
17.1. The Role of the School 285
17.1.1. School as a Space of Stability and Belonging 285
17.1.2. Educational Challenges Among Children in Foster Care 286
17.1.3. The Importance of the Relationship Between Foster Families and Schools 286
17.1.4. The Role of Teachers 287
17.1.5. School and the Development of Social Relationships 288

17.1.6. Preventing Stigmatization 288
17.1.7. Educational Continuity During Transitions 288
17.2. Physical and Mental Health 289
17.2.1. Physical Health in Foster Care 289
17.3. Coordination Between Physical and Mental Health 290
17.4. The Relationship Between Adverse Experiences and Child Health 291
17.5. Mental Health and Emotional Well-Being 291
17.5.1. The Importance of Psychological Assessment and Professional Support 292
17.5.2. Trauma and the Need for a Trauma-Sensitive Perspective 292
17.5.3. The Role of the Foster Family in Emotional Well-Being 293
Chapter 18. The Relationship with the Birth Family 295
18.1. Understanding the Birth Family 295
18.1.1. The Birth Family Within the Child's Life History 295
18.1.2. The Birth Family and the Causes of Separation 296
18.1.3. The Importance of Avoiding the Dehumanization of Biological Parents 297
18.1.4. The Child's Identity and Family Relationships 297
18.1.5. The Role of the Foster Family 298
18.1.6. A Relationship Guided by the Best Interests of the Child 298
18.2. Family Visits 299
18.2.1. The Meaning of Family Visits for the Child 299
18.2.2. Preparing for a Family Visit 300
18.2.3. The Role of the Foster Family Before and After the Visit 300
18.2.4. Family Visits and Loyalty Conflicts 301
18.2.5. When Family Visits Generate Emotional Difficulties 301
18.2.6. The Perspective of the Birth Family During Family Visits 302
18.3. Story: Today She Saw Her Mother Again 303
18.4. Supporting Family Reunions Without Creating New Wounds 305
18.4.1. Emotionally Preparing for the Reunion 306
18.4.2. Avoiding Situations in Which the Child Feels Forced to Choose 306
18.4.3. Supporting the Child's Emotions After the Visit 307
18.4.4. The Importance of Professional Coordination 307

18.4.5. Healing the Child's Story Without Erasing the Past 308
Chapter 19. The Conclusion of Foster Care 309
19.1. Return to the Birth Family or Adoption 310
19.2. Story: The Day of Goodbye 312
19.3. Guidelines for Supporting the Foster Family Through Grief..... 314
19.4. When the Bedroom Is Empty 317
Chapter 20. Looking Toward the Future..... 319
20.1. What Happens to These Children When They Reach Adulthood?..... 320
20.2. What Have We Learned as a Family? 322
20.3. Recommendations for Strengthening Public Foster Care Programs.... 324
20.4. Toward a Culture of Foster Care: A Responsibility Shared by Society 326
Epilogue 329
Bibliography 333

Introduction

Foster care is one of the primary child protection measures for children and adolescents who, for a variety of reasons, are temporarily unable to remain with their families of origin. Although its primary purpose is to provide a safe and nurturing environment while the child's family circumstances are being resolved, its implementation involves social, legal, psychological, educational, health, and administrative processes that make foster care a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.

This book examines foster care from an interdisciplinary perspective before exploring its practical application. It presents the principal conceptual, scientific, and legal foundations necessary to understand this child protection measure while also offering practical guidance for those directly involved in its implementation. The scope of the work encompasses both academic analysis and the practical realities of foster care, without limiting its focus to a single discipline or a specific institutional context.

The study of foster care has become increasingly relevant in light of the growing challenges faced by child protection systems across many countries. Factors such as domestic violence, child abandonment, poverty, migration, social conflict, substance use disorders, mental illness, and other forms of vulnerability have increased the need for well-prepared foster families and institutions capable of responding effectively. A thorough understanding of these dynamics strengthens public decision-making, improves professional practice, and promotes better developmental outcomes for children and adolescents entering protective care.

One of the greatest challenges in this field is the fragmentation of knowledge. Legal, psychological, social, educational, and healthcare perspectives are frequently examined in isolation, making it difficult to develop a comprehensive understanding of foster care. Likewise, many publications focus exclusively on theoretical frameworks or solely on practical experience, leaving a significant gap for readers seeking to integrate both perspectives. This book was conceived in response to that need by bringing together contributions from multiple disciplines within a coherent and systematically organized framework.

The purpose of this work is to provide a broad, evidence-based understanding of foster care by integrating scientific research with practical tools that facilitate both comprehension and application. It aims to offer readers a conceptual framework that enables them to understand the factors influencing foster care, interpret the diverse situations that may arise throughout the process, and apply strategies that promote child-centered practice grounded in the best interests of the child.

This book is intended for students, researchers, academics, social scientists, psychologists, social workers, educators, attorneys, healthcare professionals, policymakers, foster families, and anyone interested in understanding foster care from both a scientific and applied perspective.

One of the book's principal contributions is its integration of two dimensions that are often treated separately in the specialized literature. The first provides an interdisciplinary analysis of foster care through the lenses of the social sciences, psychology, education, law, healthcare, economics, public policy, ethics, and scientific research. The second translates this knowledge into everyday practice by examining each stage of the foster care process—from family preparation to case closure—through real-world scenarios, frequently asked questions, and practical decision-making tools.

The book is organized into two major sections. The opening chapters present the conceptual and interdisciplinary foundations necessary to understand foster care from multiple academic perspectives. The subsequent chapters follow the practical progression of the foster care process, addressing the child protection system, the preparation of foster families, a child's arrival in the home, relationship building, managing challenges, maintaining connections with the family of origin, concluding foster placements, and future directions for strengthening foster care as a child protection measure.

Although each chapter can be read independently, a sequential reading provides a progressively deeper understanding of the concepts and helps readers connect the theoretical foundations with their practical application. The content has been carefully structured to move from a broad understanding of the phenomenon toward the specific situations encountered by those involved in foster care.

By the end of this book, readers will have developed a comprehensive understanding of foster care, become familiar with the principal scientific perspectives that explain its functioning, recognize the most common challenges faced by the various stakeholders involved, and acquire the analytical tools necessary to evaluate, design, and strengthen interventions aimed at safeguarding the protection and well-being of children and adolescents within this form of care.

PART I

Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Foster Care

Chapter 1. Analysis from the Social Sciences

Interdisciplinary Foundations for Understanding Foster Families through Sociology and Social Work

Protecting children and adolescents who are temporarily or permanently unable to remain with their families of origin is one of the most complex challenges facing contemporary societies. Although the immediate need for protection often emerges at the individual or family level, scientific evidence consistently demonstrates that the circumstances leading to foster care are the result of much broader social processes in which economic, cultural, institutional, historical, legal, and community factors converge. From this perspective, understanding foster families requires moving beyond exclusively psychological or welfare-oriented interpretations to embrace a comprehensive analysis that recognizes how social structures, public policies, family relationships, and welfare systems shape both the emergence of child vulnerability and society's capacity to provide effective protective responses.

The social sciences provide the conceptual framework necessary to understand this complexity. Unlike approaches that focus solely on the individual characteristics of children or foster families, these disciplines examine the collective processes that shape child protection, analyze the relationships between institutions and citizens, explore changes in family structures, investigate social inequalities, and study the cultural dynamics that influence child development. Consequently, foster care is no longer understood merely as an administrative or judicial measure but rather as a social intervention embedded within a broader welfare system, whose effectiveness depends on the coordinated efforts of multiple actors operating across different institutional levels.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the Swedish context. For decades, Sweden has developed a universal welfare model characterized by extensive public responsibility for child protection, a highly professionalized social services system, and substantial investment in prevention and early intervention. Within this framework, municipal social services (Socialtjänsten) play a central role in risk assessment, intervention planning, and the ongoing supervision of children requiring protective measures. At the same time, foster families (familjehem) represent one of the primary mechanisms for ensuring a child's right to grow up in a family environment when remaining temporarily with their family of origin is not possible. In cases where a child's support needs exceed what foster family care can provide, specialized residential care facilities (HVB – Hem för vård eller boende) may also be involved, always guided by the principle of the best interests of the child and with the aim of ensuring that institutional care remains proportionate, individualized, and limited to the shortest duration necessary.

The specialized literature published over recent decades consistently indicates that the success of foster care programs depends not only on the goodwill of foster families or the technical competence of professionals, but also on the ongoing interaction among individual, family, community, and institutional factors. Studies conducted across the Nordic countries, Western Europe, North America, and Oceania demonstrate that the most positive outcomes in child well-being are generally achieved when interventions combine adequate financial support, continuous training for foster families, effective interagency collaboration, meaningful participation of children in decisions affecting their lives, and rigorous systems of monitoring and evaluation. These findings are consistent with recommendations issued by international organizations such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization (WHO), the Council of Europe, and the United Nations, all of which advocate child protection models grounded in children's rights, the prevention of family separation whenever possible, and the strengthening of community-based support systems.

This chapter inaugurates the book's interdisciplinary analysis by examining the contribution of the social sciences to the study of foster families. The first section explores the perspectives of Sociology and Social Work—two disciplines that provide essential insight into both the structural factors that generate the need for child protection and the institutional mechanisms through which societies organize protective responses aimed at safeguarding the well-being of children and adolescents. These disciplines establish the foundation upon which subsequent chapters will integrate perspectives drawn from anthropology, childhood studies, family studies, cultural diversity, social inclusion, and public policy.

1.1 The Social Sciences Perspective on Foster Families

The social sciences are founded on the premise that human behavior cannot be understood solely through the analysis of individual characteristics. People develop within interconnected systems of relationships that include the family, the community, educational institutions, healthcare services, labor markets, civil society organizations, and the state. Each of these systems shapes the opportunities, constraints, and life experiences of children, adolescents, and adults. Consequently, the difficulties a family may experience in providing a safe and nurturing environment rarely stem from a single cause; rather, they are typically the result of multiple interacting factors that accumulate over time.

Within the context of foster care, this systemic perspective makes it possible to understand that the temporary separation of a child from their biological family should not be viewed simply as a parental failure. Instead, it represents a complex situation in which mental health conditions, problematic substance use, domestic violence, persistent poverty, social isolation, illness, disability, migration-related

challenges, structural discrimination, long-term unemployment, inadequate housing, and the absence of supportive community networks may all play a role. The intensity and combination of these factors vary considerably from one case to another, underscoring the need for individualized assessments and interventions tailored to the specific circumstances of each child and family.

This approach also reshapes the understanding of the role of foster families. Foster families are not necessarily intended to become permanent substitutes for the family of origin. Rather, they function as part of a broader child protection system whose primary objective is to ensure the child's healthy development while, whenever possible and consistent with the child's best interests, supporting the restoration of the biological family's caregiving capacity or identifying other permanent care arrangements. From this perspective, foster care is understood as a shared responsibility among families, professionals, public institutions, and the wider community rather than as a solely private undertaking.

International research has likewise demonstrated that foster care outcomes are significantly influenced by broader social factors, including the financial stability of foster families, the availability of specialized services, the quality of interagency coordination, educational continuity, timely access to healthcare and psychological services, and the meaningful participation of children in decisions affecting their daily lives. For this reason, the social sciences emphasize that child protection should be understood as a comprehensive process of promoting well-being rather than merely as a response to situations of crisis.

In Sweden, this understanding is reflected in a welfare model in which child protection is recognized as a highly institutionalized public responsibility. Through Socialtjänsten, municipalities conduct comprehensive social assessments, coordinate community resources, oversee foster care placements, and implement preventive interventions aimed at reducing risk factors before the separation of a child from their family becomes necessary. This approach is grounded in the principle of early intervention, which is strongly supported by scientific literature demonstrating that preventive actions taken during the initial stages of vulnerability generally produce better developmental outcomes than interventions introduced only after adverse circumstances have become chronic..

1.2 Sociology and Foster Families

Sociology examines the ways in which societies organize human coexistence, the relationships between individuals and institutions, processes of social change, and the production of social inequalities. Its focus extends beyond individual behavior to explore how social structures shape people's opportunities, expectations, and life trajectories. Within the field of foster care, this perspective helps explain why

certain forms of child vulnerability occur more frequently in particular social contexts and how public institutions respond to these situations.

One of Sociology's most significant contributions is its demonstration that family difficulties cannot be understood solely as the result of individual decisions. Factors such as precarious employment, economic inequality, residential segregation, unequal access to education, discrimination, social exclusion, and the availability of public services all have a substantial influence on a family's ability to fulfill its protective role. Consequently, child protection policies should not be limited to intervening only when a child faces serious risk; they must also address the structural conditions that contribute to the emergence of such circumstances.

From this perspective, the Swedish welfare system provides an important example of how universal social policies can reduce many of the risk factors associated with child vulnerability. Broad access to healthcare, public education, family financial support, parental leave, child health programs, and municipal social services represents a preventive strategy designed to strengthen families before circumstances arise that require more intensive child protection measures. Comparative evidence indicates that universal policies of this nature can reduce certain risk factors, although they cannot entirely eliminate the need for specialized interventions in situations involving violence, severe neglect, or other circumstances incompatible with the child's best interests.

Another central issue examined by Sociology is the contemporary transformation of family structures. Today's families display considerable diversity in their composition, organization, and patterns of daily life. Single-parent, blended, adoptive, foster, extended, multicultural, and transnational families all form part of contemporary social reality. This diversity requires moving beyond rigid normative models based exclusively on the traditional nuclear family and instead focusing on a family's actual capacity to provide care, emotional stability, and protection.

In the context of foster families, this shift means recognizing that the quality of a protective environment depends less on the formal structure of the household than on factors such as emotional stability, sensitivity to the child's needs, the ability to collaborate with social services, a willingness to maintain appropriate relationships with the family of origin when beneficial to the child, and the capacity to manage the complex situations arising from trauma or adverse early experiences. Sociology therefore shifts the focus from idealized models of family to an examination of the social functions that effectively promote child well-being.

The discipline also examines the role of institutions in fostering social trust. Numerous studies conducted in the Nordic countries have shown that public confidence in government institutions facilitates collaboration between families and social services, promotes the early identification of children at risk, and increases acceptance of child protection interventions. At the same time, the

literature indicates that certain groups—particularly migrant families and historically marginalized minority communities—may experience higher levels of mistrust toward public authorities. These circumstances require culturally responsive strategies that strengthen dialogue, participation, and mutual understanding.

1.3 Social Work and Foster Families

While Sociology provides an understanding of the social structures that shape people's lives, Social Work is the discipline that transforms this knowledge into systematic intervention processes designed to promote well-being, protect human rights, and strengthen the capacities of individuals, families, and communities. Within foster care, Social Work is one of the professions bearing the greatest technical and ethical responsibility, as it is involved in virtually every stage of the child protection process: identifying situations of risk, assessing children's needs, evaluating prospective foster families, planning protective interventions, supporting placements, coordinating interagency collaboration, and evaluating outcomes.

From a contemporary perspective, Social Work extends far beyond resource management or crisis intervention. Its conceptual framework incorporates a human rights approach, the ecological model of human development, systems theory, evidence-based practice, and the active participation of individuals in decisions affecting their lives. These perspectives recognize that children are not merely recipients of protection but rights holders with an evolving capacity to express their views, participate in decisions that concern them, and contribute to the development of solutions appropriate to their age, maturity, and personal circumstances. This principle is fully aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and constitutes one of the cornerstones of the Swedish child protection system.

1.3.1 Scope of Practice and Professional Responsibility

The primary focus of Social Work is the interaction between individuals and their social environment, with particular attention to the factors that generate vulnerability, exclusion, or inequality, as well as to the strategies that promote inclusion and well-being. Within the context of foster families, the discipline examines how family, community, and institutional conditions influence child development and designs interventions aimed at reducing risk factors while strengthening protective factors.

This responsibility requires a holistic view of the child. Social workers do not evaluate only the presence of immediate danger but also the conditions that may either support or hinder a child's physical, emotional, educational, social, and

relational development over the medium and long term. Consequently, intervention shifts from responding solely to crises toward promoting more stable and protective life trajectories.

In Sweden, this role is carried out primarily by Socialtjänsten, whose professionals conduct social investigations whenever there are indications that a child may be experiencing vulnerability. These assessments seek to understand the family's circumstances from multiple perspectives, avoiding simplistic interpretations while identifying both existing challenges and family strengths. Their purpose is not merely to determine whether protective measures are required but also to identify the forms of support most appropriate for each individual situation.

1.3.2 Comprehensive Assessment as the Foundation of Intervention

One of the most significant contributions of contemporary Social Work is the development of comprehensive assessment models. Scientific evidence has demonstrated that decisions based solely on a single event or an isolated interview may lead to inaccurate conclusions. Consequently, current methodologies advocate integrating multiple sources of information, conducting longitudinal observations, and involving professionals from different disciplines in the assessment process.

In the context of foster care, comprehensive assessments typically encompass factors related to the child's development, family dynamics, parenting capacity, support networks, educational environment, health status, financial stability, cultural influences, and the characteristics of the community in which the family resides. None of these elements, considered independently, determines whether foster care is necessary; rather, what matters is understanding how they interact and the extent to which they affect the child's safety, well-being, and overall development.

The specialized literature consistently emphasizes that assessments should identify both risk factors and protective factors. A family may experience significant financial hardship while maintaining strong emotional bonds, effective caregiving abilities, and a supportive community network that promotes the child's well-being. Conversely, a financially stable family may exhibit patterns of violence, neglect, or abuse that require protective intervention. This perspective avoids the erroneous assumption that poverty alone is synonymous with inadequate parenting—a misconception that has been extensively challenged in international research.

1.3.3 Early Intervention and Prevention

One of the most firmly established principles of contemporary Social Work is early intervention. Numerous longitudinal studies have demonstrated that addressing vulnerability during its initial stages generally produces more favorable outcomes than intervening after problems have become chronic. This body of evidence has

profoundly influenced the design of Nordic welfare systems, where preventive policies occupy a central position.

Within the Swedish context, early intervention involves providing support to families before difficulties escalate to the point where separating a child from the family environment becomes necessary. Such support may include parenting guidance, family strengthening programs, psychological services, mediation, financial assistance, coordination with educational and healthcare providers, and referrals to specialized resources. The overarching objective is to preserve parental caregiving whenever doing so is consistent with the child's best interests.

When these interventions prove insufficient and a significant risk to the child's development persists, foster care may become necessary. Even under these circumstances, however, Social Work continues to support the family of origin whenever there is a realistic possibility of reunification and when reunification serves the child's best interests. This approach avoids viewing foster care as a permanent rupture and instead understands it as one stage within a broader process of protection, recovery, and family restoration.

1.3.4 The Selection and Preparation of Foster Families

Another essential area of Social Work concerns the assessment of families seeking to become familjehem (foster families). International research consistently demonstrates that placement stability depends to a large extent on the preparation of foster families, the clarity of mutual expectations, and the quality of professional support provided before and throughout the placement.

Assessing prospective foster families extends far beyond evaluating material conditions. Although financial stability and suitable housing are important considerations, research indicates that other characteristics are equally influential, including the capacity to establish secure emotional relationships, emotional self-regulation, flexibility in responding to unforeseen challenges, willingness to collaborate with social services, understanding of the effects of trauma, and recognition that foster care is fundamentally centered on the child's needs rather than the expectations of adults.

Pre-service training is another component strongly supported by empirical evidence. Training programs enable foster families to understand the potential consequences of adverse childhood experiences, become familiar with the operation of the child protection system, develop effective communication skills, and acquire practical strategies for addressing the challenges inherent in foster care. Scientific literature indicates that thorough preparation reduces the likelihood of placement disruption and contributes to greater stability and well-being for children.