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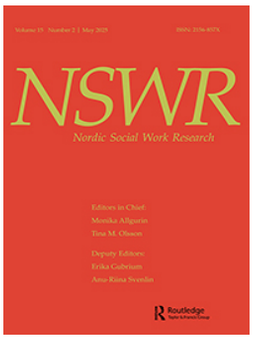

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Foster care from the perspective of younger children – a phenomenological analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article explores young foster children's experiences of foster care in Finland using a phenomenological approach, which focuses on the essence of the children's experiences of everyday lives in foster care. The main data used in this article, consisting of interviews, participant observations, messages (via WhatsApp), and photos with five children, were gathered for over a year using 'walking with' and mosaic approaches. The analysis uses a descriptive analysis, and the essential meaning is further explicated through five constituents that describe the structure of foster care: normalizing, sharing, not-knowing, longing and managing. The results emphasize the importance of obtaining children's experiences and knowledge and of providing individual support when children are the focus of interventions. More focus needs to be given on a holistic understanding of the child 's way of viewing their world, requiring professionals to gain a deep insight into the child 's life-world. More focus needs to be on supporting children in the complex social situations that foster care brings, and on supporting and helping children to find strategies to manage longing.

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Phenomenology; foster care; child's perspective; experiences; knowledge

Introduction

This study, influenced by childhood studies and phenomenology, views children as social agents (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). Conducted in two Finnish counties (2021–2023), it involved five foster children aged 7–12.

Children's perspectives, reflecting their perceptions and understanding of their lifeworld, can be seen as children's phenomenology (Sommer et al. 2011). Incorporating these perspectives shifts research away from an adult-centred lens, recognizing children's lived experiences as valuable knowledge (Fricker 2007; Montreuil et al. 2021).

Foster care is a key aspect of child protection, with foster children representing a marginalized and vulnerable minority due to social challenges within their families of origin (Backe-Hansen et al. 2013). While out-of-home care can provide stability, it also introduces complex life circumstances (Christiansen, Karen, et al. 2013; Holland 2009; Schwartz 2018). Transitions in foster care are often traumatic and distinct from planned life changes (Andenæs 2011; Winter 2014).

Foster children's vulnerability is heightened by their histories, dependence on professionals, and frequent exclusion from social work research (Arnadottir et al. 2023). Many lack essential knowledge about their backgrounds, the reasons for their placement, and the expectations surrounding them (S. Wilson et al. 2020).

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Foster care

Family is crucial for a child's development, providing a sense of belonging and fostering self-identity (Rabiau 2019). The UNCRC (1989) underscores the family as the primary social environment for ensuring children's protection and care. Also, the Finnish Child Welfare Act enacts foster care as primary in case of custody.

In Finland, foster care aims to provide a safer upbringing, but is also characterized by temporality. Foster children have special rights (Child Welfare Act 417/2007), including the right to information about the placement, maintaining contact with parents, and sufficient interaction with child protection professionals.

International research on foster care from a child's perspective focuses on a range of issues including foster children's experiences of moving into foster care (Goodyer 2014; Winter 2014); sharing stories from their pasts (Steenbakken, Van der Steen, and Grietens 2021); supportive and inclusion practices (Fylkesnes et al. 2021; Hedin, Höjer, and Brunnberg 2011) and their participation in their foster placements (Nordenfors 2016). Extensive attention has been given to children's rights and involvement in decision-making (Delgado et al. 2019; Jack and Donellan 2013; K. Wilson et al. 2004), including younger children's perspectives (Goodyer 2014; Winter 2014) and their emotions (Delgado et al. 2019; Van Holen et al. 2022).

A range of methodological approaches has been used to gather children's views including interviews (Goodyer 2014), creative arts-based methodologies (Winter 2014) and video diaries (Bengtsson and Luckow 2020).

National studies have primarily used interviews and diaries (Hämäläinen 2012; Kallinen 2024; Pölkki et al. 2012), while Lehto-Lundén (2020)applied creative methods and phenomenology to explore younger children's experiences of supportive families. Phenomenology remains limited in Finnish social work research (Lehto-Lundén 2020).

Studies by Hämäläinen (2012) and Kallinen (2024) examine foster children's perceptions of home, biological ties, and family dynamics after entering foster care, suggesting that relational changes impact them more than physical relocation. Pölkki et al. (2012) highlight foster children's feelings of exclusion in child protection processes, though they feel more heard in foster care than in previous placements. The research underscores the need for adequate information about placements and future plans. However, these studies remain narrow, lacking a comprehensive view of foster children's everyday experiences, emphasizing the need for a more holistic research approach.

Three knowledge remains evident in understanding foster children's experiences, particularly in Finland. First, few studies examine the everyday life perspectives of children in foster care (Hayes et al. 2022). Second, limited research addresses how foster children manage difficult emotions and behaviours in challenging social situations. Third, perspectives of younger children remain underrepresented in the literature (Holland 2009). This study aims to fill these gaps by providing a holistic perspective on the experiences of vulnerable children in foster care.

The study

This study was conducted in two welfare counties in Finland between 2020 and 2023, with five foster children aged 7–12 in a yearlong research process. Data were collected using a multi-method approach, also known as the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss 2001). The children had been in foster care for over a year, with most having lived in foster care for 5–10 years. The study explored foster care from the children's subjective perspectives, focusing on their everyday lives, social environments, and activities. The main research question was what are the essential constituents of children's experiences in foster care?

Children were recruited through their social workers, who acted as gatekeepers. Only children whose biological and foster parents consented participated. Information about the study was

provided both in writing and orally. Initial contact was in all cases but one made during the child's client review meeting or with the social worker.

The researcher's preconceptions were clarified through the review of prior research, method selection, and study design. An initial aim was to include more children, but the sample size was intentionally reduced to five participants (Morse 1994) after more than 1.5 years of recruitment efforts, as the data was rich. All the children showed genuine interest in participating, and none chose to withdraw.

Methods

This lifeworld-based research focuses on foster children's perspectives, contributing to the growing body of research on children's subjective viewpoints (K. Dahlberg 2019). This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological approach rooted in Husserl's philosophy, which is particularly suited to social work research. Phenomenology seeks to explore people's lived experiences, giving voice to perspectives often overlooked (K. Dahlberg 2019; Husserl 1995).

The phenomenological methodology is designed to gain deep understandings of lived experiences. Using empirical data and an inductive approach, the study aims to uncover the underlying meaning structures of the foster care experience, as outlined by Husserl (1995). Phenomenology addresses questions such as what a phenomenon is and how it is experienced (Moustakas 1994).

This research meets the two core criteria of phenomenology: it examines the phenomenon of foster care, and it captures the essence of the participants' experiences (Husserl 1995). Through empirical data, the study reflects foster children's feelings, thoughts, and actions – whether conscious or unconscious – providing insights into their lived realities.

Data

Table 1 shows an outline of participants and the data. The data was collected by the first author (SK).

Table 1. Empirical data.

Child	Gender	Age	Interviews	Observations	Messages	Photos
1	Girl	7y 7m	6 5 interviews in foster family. 1 phone interview. Tot 206 min.	6 4 in foster family and 2 in family of origin. Tot 765 min.	8 6 written and voice record and 2 phone calls.	3
2	Boy	8y, 11m	5 2 interviews in foster family, 2 in family of origin and 1 phone interview. Tot 156 min.	7 4 in foster family and 3 in the family of origin. Tot 700 min.	6 Written and voice records	The child preferred to talk about three important things
3	Girl	12y, 7m	4 3 interviews in foster family and 1 phone interview. Tot 203 min.	3 All in foster family. Tot 345 min.	7 Written and video	3
4	Girl	11y, 11m	4 All interviews in foster family. Tot 198 min.	5 3 in foster family and 2 in family of origin. Tot 685 min.	7 Written	3
5	Girl	12y, 5m	4 All interviews in foster family. Tot 235 min.	2 Both in foster family. Tot 166 min.	8 Written	3
Total	4 Girl/1 Boy		958 min.	2675 min.	36	12 and 1 in narrative format

All data collection focused on foster care, guided by the question, 'What is going on here?' The research design integrated qualitative methods (S. Dahlberg, Ellingsen, and Rosberg 2019) and ensured children were consistently informed.

The 'walking with' approach was used in interviews, observations, and photo sessions, involving movement through various environments with the child. This method fostered trust, personal involvement, and insight into the child's life world (Barlett et al. 2023; May and Perry 2001) while reducing researcher bias, a challenge in observation-based studies (K. Dahlberg, Dahlberg, and Nyström 2008).

All data was securely handled, accessible only to the researcher (SK), and password-protected. WhatsApp messages and photos were immediately transferred to safe storage. In these counties, WhatsApp is approved for use in interaction between social workers and children.

The empirical data included phenomenological interviews with children (Table 1), lasting 12 to 105 minutes, mostly audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first interview focused on general themes, while the later ones explored deeper topics (Robinson and Englander 2007). The creative interview design encouraged free dialogue, play, and drawings (Webb 2019). Active listening and reflective dialogue guided the approach, embracing children's natural attitudes (Bevan 2014; Engelsrud and Rosberg 2019). To minimize stress, family members could attend, and children chose the interview location and time schedule.

The phenomenological, unstructured interviews (Bevan 2014) explored children's daily lives, friendships, activities, emotions, and foster care experiences (Moustakas 1994). Open-ended and wh-questions (why, what, who, when), along with techniques like repeating keywords, questioning tones, and summarizing responses (e.g. 'Do I understand you correctly that. . .?'), helped deepen experiences (Engelsrud and Rosberg 2019).

This data includes participant observations (Table 1) conducted in children's foster and origin families, both indoors and outdoors, while engaging in their daily activities. These observations enabled an understanding of non-verbal communication, experiences and included engagement (May and Perry 2001).

Observations were crucial for understanding children with limited verbal skills or difficulty expressing themselves (K. Dahlberg 2019). Integrated into the child's natural environment, they were unstructured yet focused on experiences, actions, and emotions to better comprehend foster care. Observing children in various social contexts deepened insights into their behaviours and emotions (May 2001). Descriptive and reflecting field notes served multiple functions, primarily helping to construct detailed, rich descriptions of the phenomena context (Phillippi and Lauderdale 2018).

In the later stages of data collection, WhatsApp was chosen by the children to document everyday life through a diary approach. Messages (Table 1) were maintained for 6–8 weeks, with the children messaging the researcher. They shared daily activities, feelings, and wishes through text, audio, and videos using their own phones. The children's photos served as a creative means to explore meaningful relationships and objects, viewed as representations of their reality.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were continuously assessed and were both time-bound and situational, adapting to the children's everyday life. The principles of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) were followed. All parties (children, parents, foster parents and social workers) received written and verbal information, and the child's guardians signed informed consent. Before each session, the children gave their verbal consent. Throughout the research, it was ensured that the children understood the purpose of the research and their rights to withdraw at any time. Understanding access to private spaces as a privilege, this study

actively involved foster children in the research process. They had an opportunity to decide how they participated and which environments, locations, and people they wanted to share. Children's permission was prioritized before asking questions or entering their daily spaces. By allowing them to guide, it was ensured that they could control how much they wished to share (Kaukko et al. 2017).

To ensure anonymity of a small sample, the children's names are fictitious.

The analysis

All empirical data, interviews, field notes, messages, photos and drawings created by two children have been transformed into written text. The analysis was conducted as a whole. To prevent inhibiting participants' free expression and avoid researcher bias, analysis was conducted after data collection was completed. However, to minimize misinterpretations of children's feelings and actions, spoken language was analysed first, followed by field notes and visual material. This was done to ensure that all data underwent the same descriptive analysis.

This study applied Giorgi's (1996) descriptive analysis, found suitable for less extensive data. To reach the required philosophical attitude, the researchers applied the phenomenological method epoché to brackets or suspends judgements about the natural world to focus on conscious experiences. A pragmatic approach to epoché was applied, taking a curious and questioning attitude towards the phenomenon under investigation, making space to create new knowledge (K. Dahlberg 2019; Husserl 1995). To reach the essence of this study horizontalization was applied, meaning that all constituents were treated as equally important (Moustakas 1994).

The data-driven analysis followed a five-step process. First, the first author familiarized herself with the data. Second, themes were identified by breaking the data into manageable meaning units. Third, everyday descriptions of the phenomenon were transformed into the language of the researcher, with meaning units interpreted based on the highlighted themes. The focus was on participants' views of foster care as an everyday experience, emphasizing how each child perceived, thought about, engaged with, and felt about foster care. Interview data, field notes, contacts, and children's photo descriptions were organized into tables, with each child's material kept separate until step four.

In the fourth step, a holistic structure was developed by grouping meaning units with similar content together and creating a specific situated structure for each participant. Then, a table of all categories was compiled to clarify the main themes and identify the essence of their meaning. Finally, the fifth step involved synthesizing a general description of the phenomenon, highlighting the essence by identifying constituents common to all the children's experiences (Giorgi 1996).

The analysis resulted in five invariant constituents of foster care: *normalizing, sharing, not-knowing, longing*, and *managing*, representing universal aspects of the children's experiences and describing the core structure of foster care.

Results

Normalising

The first constituent was normalizing. Children talked about the experience of being a foster child as something normal, as the position they are in today. Normalizing was understood as a process with a double meaning: to cope and adapt to a new situation and a wish to see oneself as `normal`. The feeling of 'normal' seems to develop gradually when being removed from the place of origin:

> Well, it's a bit weird at first, like going to a strange family, but then when you get to know that family, then it kind of starts to feel like family, and then it doesn't differ anymore in how I would behave like in my own family, like with biological parents, so it's not different from that anyway. (Angel)

The experience of being normal today does not exclude the feeling of being different for some children at certain times.

The experience of being different evokes anxiety that can last for a long time, making it a demanding time and experience for children. However, not all children had the experience of being different:

'I have never thought about being different from others' (Constantin)

Foster children living in care from a very young age may come to view it as their 'normal'. For some, it becomes so routine that they do not even reflect on it.

Some children normalized the changes in their foster families by comparing them to the physical moves and shifting family dynamics they had previously experienced in their biological families. For these children, living in foster care seemed so routine and ordinary that they perceived it as having no significant impact on them.

> 'And then, living in foster care, it's not really different from living with the biological parent; because it doesn't really affect my life in any way'. (Angel)

Normalising was described as getting used to changes in the foster family, as, for example, foster siblings moving in and out. Even then, children described experiences of getting used to changes as a process:

'It felt weird in the beginning, but now it feels normal' (Constantin).

The children explained that changes in foster families did not affect their way of being or behaving at the moment as

'It does not affect me' (Constantin) or 'I don't do anything special´ (Susie)

Observations in the foster children's living environment offered an opportunity to see them continuing their everyday lives and activities despite changes as the following field note (FN) describes (18 May 2022 foster family): 'a new child, of high school age, has moved into the foster family. According to [Angel], this change has not affected the child. [Angel] states that the child will only live with the foster family for a short time and will not stay for a longer period'.

Some children included new foster siblings in their games quite quickly, while others kept their distance. Normalization required the child to learn new skills as part of the process:

> 'Yes, and do you know what, I'm now used to making those video calls to Mom'. (Cherry)

Normalising even happens when getting used to living in two different places with different rules, routines and activities and some children did not consider it non-normative, rather the opposite:

> 'Well, I'm used to them [the differences]; it would be weird if they kind of turned the other way around'. (Angel)

Foster children adapted to their new normal, with differences gradually becoming part of their daily lives. However, this adaptation did not always mean acceptance or approval. Some children expressed frustration with the routines and rules in their biological parents' homes, while others disliked the rules in their foster homes.

Sharing

The second constituent describing the structure of foster care was sharing. When the children spoke about sharing, it involved dividing their everyday life and time between at least two homes, families, and parents. Usually, children described 'my family' as an extended family including the family members of origin and foster family, they still talked about sharing their everyday between two quite different homes and parents. Children talked about foster homes and foster parents as second homes and parents, but not as 'real' homes or 'real' parents or as Cherry explains it:

'I think it's like home but not my own home'.

Sharing was a recurring theme, encompassing time spent with siblings, grandparents, relatives, and godparents. Foster children shared their daily lives with biological siblings in their original homes, foster siblings in foster families, or in homes with or without siblings. These dynamics often included frequent and rapid changes.

Some children described how sharing time with grandparents and relatives sometimes took time away from their foster family or biological parents. Their experiences also highlighted the role of sharing their time with support families, with whom they spent time when foster parents were temporarily relieved of caregiving duties. Additionally, foster care required setting aside time for formal interactions with professionals, including school staff, therapists, and child protection services, which further shaped their daily lives. Shared everyday life, the child's rotation between different homes, happened regularly, sometimes even weekly:

> 'I tell new friends that I am sometimes at Mom's house and sometimes at the foster family house'. (Constantin)

This type of everyday sharing often occurred actively between the two homes. For some children, this arrangement worked well, as they could continue attending the same school and therapies regardless of location. At its most seamless, sharing involved foster children moving easily between homes, visiting the foster family or parents' home to meet friends or collect belongings. The following FN (28 March 2022) took place in the foster family: we discussed with [Constantin] and the foster mother that [Constantin] sometimes visits the foster family during periods of time with mother of origin just to meet friends. Less intensive sharing typically occurred on weekends and holidays, some children again shared longer holidays between families, as Melinda's (FN 18 May 2022), 'Melinda happily tells that she heard from her mother that during the upcoming summer holiday, she will be able to spend a month with her mother'.

The two homes sometimes shared similar living cultures but could also differ significantly in lifestyle, values, and physical environments. Foster care structures often involved varying degrees of shared parenthood and responsibility, such as attending school meetings or managing dental appointments. However, the intensity of shared responsibility varied, and some foster and biological parents were nearly daily involved in the child's life, while in other cases, contact between the two sets of parents was minimal. Foster care created a boundary between the two homes, with limited interaction between parents of origin and foster parents.

Sometimes children shared their time between two different peer groups, while others had the same peer group regardless of where they stayed. Some children had few friends. It was quite common for birthdays to be shared between two homes and different people, with the same procedure applied to Christmas and other holidays. FN (13 November 2022) at Susie's foster family: 'The discussion turns to the child's birthday, and Susie explains that she usually celebrates twice, once with the mother of origin and once with the foster family'. The children appreciated being able to celebrate holidays twice and receive gifts twice.

Foster care is about sharing important events, concerns and everyday experiences with parents available:

> 'When I'm here with my mom, but if I'm with the foster family, I tell the foster parents'. (Constantin)

For some foster children, the opportunity to share important concerns with their biological parents was available, regardless of where they stayed or when:

'I can always talk to my [biological] mom' (Angel).

Everyday experiences were shared quite openly and spontaneously by foster children with both families.

Some children were more cautious, saying that they share only their activities in the foster family or noteworthy events. Cherry's field note (16 November 2021) during her stay with mother of origin; 'She calls her mother daily from the foster family to share what she is doing, but explain that rarely she talks about the foster family unless something significant happens'. A safe, open relationship between the families supported the child and encouraged open sharing of experiences.

However, sharing also meant disclosing private matters to multiple authorities, which was not always appreciated and sometimes discouraged children from speaking:

> 'There was so much I wanted to talk about, but I didn't dare to say that when the teacher was there'. (Susie)

When needed, children wanted themselves to share private matters with the schools, but they preferred to keep their school and private lives separate.

Sharing in foster care extends from their physical environments to sharing their private belongings, such as pets, clothes, phones and other important belongings, between two homes. The children were not always able to have private bedrooms and beds in both homes, as they often shared bedrooms with siblings or biological parents, or slept on a sofa or shared a bed with their biological parents.

Not-knowing

The constituent of not-knowing is central to the foster care experience, affecting children's daily lives through various uncertainties. 'Not-knowing' include the period before removal, future plans, family details, and gaps in understanding between children and social workers despite regular contact. It also extends to everyday matters, such as school decisions, foster siblings moving away, or the absence of visits from parents and grandparents.

Reasons for their removal, such as parental incapacity or conflicts and quarrels between adults, were understood by the children to some extent. However, many felt uncertain about the full reasons, struggled to articulate them, and wanted more clarity about their situations.

'You have to ask my mother, she knows' (Julia).

Foster children primarily sought information from their parents or foster parents and rarely from child protection professionals:

SK: Who could you ask about that [reasons for being removed] if you wanted to know?

Constantin: Well, from Mom.

SK: From the mother in this house (foster mother)?

Constantin: Yes.

SK: Well, how much have you talked about it?

Constantin: Well, not so much.

Understanding their background and journey into foster care was rare, requiring children to actively explore it themselves. Observations showed that some parents of origin tried to explain the reasons, but children often couldn't remember or didn't want to talk about it. Discussing what needed to change for the child to return home was even less clear. When children asked foster parents, they were told the social worker would decide, or as Cherry said:

'I haven't talked to my mother, a little to my foster mother. . . '.

This topic was not addressed or explained to foster children by professionals, foster parents or parents. In cases where the theme was touched upon, the child had asked their foster parents.

As a result of not-knowing, foster children's history and future became blurred. Children's experiences indicated that a longing for home, but also to stay in the foster family, existed. However, the opportunity to influence is scarce, and foster care is about waiting and taking one day at a time:

> 'Well, I don't want anything, I don't have any wishes, I just watch what comes my way'. (Constantin)

In foster care children are told that social workers are responsible for decisions, but knowledge is missing about who the children can talk to about their plans. The experience of a planned future was unusual, and cancellations of planned returns were observed.

Not-knowing also involved one's family members; the children talked about their families as follows:

'I could tell you about my mother, because I don't know about my father' (Cherry) or

'I was just a baby (when last met), so I don't remember anything' (Julia).

Reasons for lacking contact with parents was hard to understand

Some children felt that no one could help with these experiences, despite adults' efforts. The not-knowing extended to the extended family, as children were unfamiliar with half-siblings or struggled to understand the disrupted contact with familiar people, such as parents' partners. Not-knowing included that neither the child protection services nor the social workers really knew the child and their wishes:

SK: Does your social worker know what you want and think?

Cherry: Well, I don't think so.

SK: Well, what makes you think so?

Cherry: Well, I guess (the social worker) doesn't know what I want.

A stable relationship allowed for a deeper understanding of the child's situation, as the children were aware that new professionals might not know them well. In foster care, child protection tasks, support interventions, decision-making, and practices remained unclear. Not-knowing also included uncertainty about when children would be able to influence or participate in processes such as client plan reviews and practical arrangements as a professional's obligation to write a client plan.

Social workers' decision-making or changes in already done agreements, e.g. around contacts with the parents, are hard to understand without explanations. The experience of lacking accurate information about having an influence, knowing one's rights and taking a stand on matters important to the children was common. Cherry tried to express her wishes:

'I tried to express my wish, but it was not accepted' (Cherry);

yet, the reasons for the rejection remained unclear for her. The data revealed experiences of not being listened to and not being asked about wishes, even if the children participated in meetings with professionals. Not getting their opinions across related to children not daring to tell their personal opinions and wanting to stay loyal.

Knowledge is important in foster care, as the data showed that children value and need it:

'Well, that I should know what has happened, and that I should know what should be done to help me' (Susie).

Knowing things help prevent overthinking, as Angel express:

'Well, I guess if I didn't know then I'd start overthinking things, that's the worst thing I know'.

Knowing your history is important for the foster child, as shown in the following excerpt:

Susie: Because you want to know what it has been like for you when you were younger.

SK: Yes, why do you think that's important to know?

Foster children may recall that 'someone told them something', but their memories were often blurry.

The experience of not-knowing was challenging for children, often causing emotions like anger, frustration, irritation, and helplessness. These themes repeatedly emerged during data collection, highlighting their ongoing impact. The uncertainty led children to actively seek information, turning to parents, foster parents, grandparents, or even searching independently on social media.

Information was primarily received by foster children from their foster and biological parents. Rarely did children approach child protection professionals with questions, though some discussed their missed contact with parents. In one case, not knowing led a child to idealize a father she barely knew. In other cases, it resulted in speculation, misunderstandings, or even distorted perceptions of reality. One child, for example, sought to make sense of the situation by identifying changes that needed to occur in their biological home: 'That Mom has to unpack things from boxes and bags, Mom has to stop smoking, that Mom's knee should not always be sore or that Mom could always take care of me' (Cherry). According to the children, they would receive all needed information when they reached the age of majority as a result of professionals' obligation to document: 'they write everything (professionals)' (Susie), the experience showed they needed information sooner to process things.

Longing

In the fourth constituent, longing was described as being occupied by feelings of longing every day. The people and objects that children chose as the most important during the photo sessions were closely tied to those, they missed the most, often reflecting the individuals they considered most significant in their lives. Longing was a central and constant part of the children's daily lives, in the same way as not-knowing. The presence of longing manifests in the children's statements as:

'Well, but I'll miss Mom anyway, even though I'm here (mother of origin)'. (Constantin)

The feeling of longing seems to increase over time in care rather than diminish.

The children expressed longing for their biological parents, whether present or absent in their lives. The loss of an absent parent was experienced as equally challenging as the loss of a present parent. Additionally, the loss of foster parents was identified as particularly difficult. Determining whether they missed their biological or foster parents more was often difficult, as for Cherry:

SK: What would you tell children living in two places?

Cherry: Well, do you miss your mom or do you miss your foster family?

SK: What do you think children would answer?

Cherry: I don't really know, I don't know either . . .

One child did not express feeling any sense of missing their foster family, but the longing for mother of origin was strong:

> 'It's usually just the other way. I don't usually miss coming here (foster family) because Mom is always Mom' (Angel).

Longing in foster care also included missing foster siblings who had moved on, as well as a desire for a playmate, pet, or grandparents. Foster children, as Julia described longing usually as 'it's just the feeling' or:

> that I would like to see her, I haven't seen her in a long time, and I've gotten a little sad when she hasn't sent me congratulations in like two years and hasn't said 'Happy Christmas' and then I told her 'Happy Mother's Day', but she didn't answer, even though she has seen it (Susie).

Loss activated feelings of anger and sadness, particularly when returning to the foster family. Some children expressed their loss through tears and considered it brave to show their emotions rather than hide them. Longing was a consistent aspect of the foster care experience, with children aware that other foster children also missed their parents. Longing seemed the hardest to endure in the evenings: 'Well evenings usually' (Constatin), and during longer periods when the children were not allowed to see parents:

> 'These are the worst, when they are so long . . . ' (Angel).

In this case, it was about 10 days. Staying overnight with biological parents was seen as more favourable than shorter visits. It appeared that children did not share their feelings of longing with other foster siblings:

> 'Well, we don't talk, adults talk to children' (Constantin)

Foster children also attempted to cope with their longing on their own expressing as Julia:

> I'll be fine myself or I manage it.

Foster care involves developing individual strategies to cope with loss. Being able to talk to the person they missed was seen as helpful, with children often saying, 'We talk a while'. They needed the ability to call the person they missed, even at night, to help them settle. However, talking on the phone sometimes intensified their feelings, so some children preferred using other communication channels to stay in touch.

Maintaining distance during separation was a survival strategy, as was staying busy with activities like watching TV and trying 'not to think' or focusing on something else.

Having a goodbye hug, transitioning from the parent to the foster family via school, and having a cuddly toy helped children cope with the loss and positively impacted their sleep.

Managing

The fifth constituent, managing different social situations and relationships, highlights how foster care functions as a living environment where children navigate social dynamics with varying degrees of autonomy. While many aspects of their lives were structured and managed by adults, especially child protection professionals, foster children often handled peer relationships independently. In contrast, their closest relationships, with parents, grandparents, and siblings, were usually scheduled and regulated by professionals, limiting the children's direct control over these interactions:

> 'They [social workers] decide when to see Mom and when I can see other people' (Cherry).

It was common for children to describe `never being asked´ about how to manage close contacts, with adults typically controlling these interactions:

> 'Foster Mom and social worker decide' (Julia) and 'no one ever asked me' (Constantin).

From the children's perspective, they thought everyone should have the independence to decide for themselves and enjoy unrestricted time with their parents. Some children felt they had more control over the duration of contact with loved ones or experienced a sense of agency by participating in meetings with professionals. They expressed managing daily communication with parents and siblings autonomously through phone calls or other channels. However, some had restricted access to smartphones, requiring permission or being limited to evening use.

In contrast, children had little control over relationships with foster siblings or the children of their support families, as these interactions were mainly determined by adults. However, within foster families, children had some autonomy in choosing with whom they spent their time, giving them a degree of agency in their social interactions. Maintaining relationships takes time; however, the children experienced insufficient time for all relationships important to them and prioritized time with their biological parents. In general, they spent more time with friends when staying at their foster families' than when staying with parents of origin:

> 'If I'm with Mom, and there's an opportunity to be with Mom, then yes I am [with her]' (Constantin) and 'I'd like to see like all my friends, but when there's not enough time, or when I'm with my mom, I meet friends every now and then. I do want to see everyone, but I also want to be with Mom' (Angel).

Children even explained that they make excuses to avoid the conflict of having to prioritize their parents over their friends, a situation that had sometimes led to broken friendships.

Because there is a sense that there is not enough time to maintain all contacts, the breakdown of some friendships is acceptable:

> 'Well that's okay, no, I don't have time for everyone though, for those who live closer, so there's the most time for them' (Angel).

Others found that it was not such a big deal:

> It's probably okay, because it's never been really hard except that if my friends ask if they can come to me, then I say that I'm at my dad's (biological), but not anything else because then they get it (Susie).

The friends they spent the most time with, such as neighbourhood children, understood their situation best, while other, less close friends were not perceived as understanding.

To manage the time spent with their friends while staying with their parents of origin, some children chose to return home earlier than planned or meet friends only briefly, expressing that they

decided to spend time with their parents instead. When spending more time with friends than with parents, the children made these decisions actively as Constantin:

'I'll be with Mom tomorrow'.

Managing information about living in foster care was common:

'Well, they never ask, but if they did, maybe then (I should tell them)' (Cherry).

Children were open to explaining their situation when asked or when the opportunity arose. Discussions about their family often came up during school assignments, and they generally felt that it wasn't a big deal among friends or at school, as their peers understood. From their perspective, it was better for their peers to know than to keep secrets:

Because when I was young, I was afraid to tell people that I was in family care, so it took me over six months before I told my best friend, but nowadays I like that everyone knows, that they don't have to assume. When I switched to another school, the boys in my class thought I was adopted. I don't like that people assume, so it's better that they know; then, they don't have to assume (Angel).

Managing the situations with peers, the children decided for themselves what to share and always experienced founding ways to explain:

'No, I always come up with something myself' (Susie) and

'I tell them they are my parents' (Julia).

If the children were asked questions about their situation as foster children that they couldn't answer, they simply let them be. Parental approval to discuss the reasons for placement was crucial; without it, children withheld information. When they had their parents' approval, they shared what they felt comfortable with.

Foster care required children to manage their behaviour in different situations, making conscious decisions based on circumstances and previous experiences. Susie talks about situations when she became angry in parents or origin home:

'No, then I just try to be quiet and not care' (Susie),

comparing to managing angry feelings in the foster home, where Susie was confident to show all feelings. Other managing strategies included adjusting their behaviour to fit the expectations of both sets of parents and siblings. Children even dealt with challenging situations by minimizing their presence and thinking positively.

There appear to be situations in foster care where children are aware of their behaviour but are unable to manage it, or they struggle to explain and understand it, even though they recognize their actions as Angel explains it:

'no one believes me when I say I can't understand my behaviour' (Angel).

Another managing strategy children used was to avoid hurting their foster parents' feelings, showing loyalty and a desire to maintain harmony in their relationships.

Loyalty can have significant consequences when children set aside their own desires to avoid hurting adults, often prioritizing the adults' feelings over their own needs. Transitions required foster children to actively manage emotionally challenging situations when moving between their foster families, biological homes, and support families. These transitions triggered strong emotions, resulting in challenging behaviours such as hiding, physical aggression, irritability, screaming, and expressing a desire not to return. In some instances, the return time was delayed due to their resistance.

Attempts to influence the transfer were experienced unsuccessful, and the child had to return.

Discussion

Foster care in this study is described through five key concepts of children's experiences: normalizing, sharing, not-knowing, longing, and managing. While foster care may appear as an ordinary, active life, a deeper look reveals its complexities and challenges. The phenomenological approach

highlights that foster children are both vulnerable and autonomous, capable of navigating complex situations and emotions (K. Dahlberg 2019).

Foster care requires children to develop coping strategies for social situations, yet they often face conflicting emotions due to uncertainty in their lives. The study confirms that foster care limits children's control over close relationships while granting autonomy in peer interactions. However, professionals often fail to engage meaningfully with children to address their concerns (Hallet and Prout 2003).

Findings suggest that children can feel belonging to multiple families, yet their longing for their biological family remains a persistent challenge requiring more attention from child protection professionals (K. Dahlberg, Ranheim, and Dahlberg 2018; Van Holen et al. 2022). The study underscores the need to actively involve children in decision-making and information-sharing to support their identity and sense of control (Bečević, Höjer, and Sjöblom 2018). The lack of information provided to children in care remains a significant issue, requiring improvements to make their daily lives more understandable (Vis et al. 2012; S. Wilson et al. 2020).

This study provides valuable insights into Finnish foster care, one field lacking research on children's everyday experiences. It fills a critical gap, offering a child-centred perspective essential for improving practices and policies. The methodology demonstrates how even younger children's experiences can be accessed, emphasizing the importance of lived experiences in social work (Bečević, Höjer, and Sjöblom 2018).

Foster care is not always temporary, as this study indicates, highlighting the need for long-term research on its lasting effects. While longitudinal studies are crucial for understanding foster care's impact, they pose challenges (Jackson et al. 2013). However, it is possible to follow and include even vulnerable children over time, providing a more accurate understanding of foster care's effects on development and well-being.

Despite a small sample size, this research offers in-depth insights and encourages professionals to engage with foster children more effectively, helping them manage the emotions and social dilemmas inherent in foster care.

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