

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The relationship between foster care families and birth families in a child welfare context: The determining factors

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## Abstract

Children placed in foster care families usually continue to see their birth parents in supervised and home visits. These children deal with the fact that they belonged to two families in a context where the relationship between the two families is sometimes complex and tense. Based on 45 semi-structured interviews conducted with foster care families and kinship foster care families, the present study examines the relationship between foster care parents and birth parents in a placement context, and focuses on the factors affecting the nature and quality of this relationship. The results showed that the quality of the relationship dynamics varies according to the following: how well and how often the parent-child visits took place, the birth parents' characteristics, and the foster carers' attitudes. The results also showed that placements in kinship foster care families were more likely to result in conflict and tension between the two parties than placements in regular foster care families.

## KEYWORDS

child welfare, contact (with birth relatives), family placement, foster care (family), kinship care, parenting/parenthood

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Most children who live in foster care families have contact with their birth parents and continue to see them in supervised or home visits. Several studies have looked at the continuity of relationships and frequency of contact between children in foster care and their birth parents, and noted that several contextual factors (frequency and regularity of contacts, professional support, contact preparation and planning, time since the beginning of the placement, emotions and feelings experienced by the child) affect the contacts and their impact on children (Browne & Moloney, 2002; Hunt, Waterhouse, & Lutman, 2010; McWey, Acock, & Porter, 2010; Moyers, Farmer, & Lipscombe, 2006; Neil, Beek, & Schofield, 2003; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). However, the relationship between foster care families and birth families and the factors influencing the quality of this relationship have not been widely documented. Nevertheless, this relationship has a direct effect on a child in placement who, in many cases, is attached to both families (Andersson, 2009; Baker, Mehta, & Chong, 2013; Leathers, 2002; Linares, Rhodes, & Montalto, 2010; Schofield & Beek, 2005). It also has an effect on the child's stability, because conflicts between the two families jeopardize the quality of the placement and can eventually result in the child being moved elsewhere (Austerberry

et al., 2013; Kalland & Sinkkonen, 2001; Triseliotis, Borland, & Hill, 2000; Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaillie, Van Holen, De Maeyer, & Andries, 2012). Different factors can help or hinder the development and maintenance of a positive relationship between the foster care and birth families. The quality of the relationship between the two families is closely linked to the children's contact with their parents: "Foster parent-birth parent relationships seem to be intertwined with foster parent-child relationships" (Andersson, 2009: 23). The present study thus looked at the relationship between foster care families and birth families from the point of view of foster care families (FFs) and kinship foster care families (KFFs). It aimed at better understanding how the two families "got along" in the welfare context joint family space, how contact and visits took place, and how they were considered by the foster care parents.

In the Province of Québec, Canada, decisions concerning contact between children and their birth family are regulated by the Youth Protection Act (Loi sur la protection de la jeunesse) in child welfare. Focusing on the preservation of the family and maintaining relationships, the law stipulates that "every decision [...] must aim at keeping the child in the family environment" and, when this is not possible, "the parents' involvement must always be fostered, with a view to encouraging and helping them to exercise their parental

responsibilities" (YPA, s. 4). Maintaining the relationship between the child and birth parents is a top priority, and social practitioners must encourage parents to stay involved in their child's life. The Youth Protection Act considers that it is in the children's best interest to maintain contact with their birth family.

### 1.1 | Belonging to two families

For children in foster care, the relationship between their foster and birth families is an important factor in their well-being. It is known that it is detrimental for children to be exposed to interparental conflict due to the emotional insecurity it creates (Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2006). The behaviour of foster carers and biological parents who maintain conflictual relationships (belittling, bargaining, and competing for children's affection and love) puts the children in a stressful and uncomfortable situation of conflict (Baker et al., 2013; Neil & Howe, 2004; Nesmith, 2013). A study by Linares et al. (2010) shows that children become anxious when put in the middle of a conflict between the parental figures from their foster and birth families. Conversely, they are less stressed when their foster parents have a positive attitude towards their birth parents, and when they refrain from passing judgement on their other family (Morrison, Mishna, Cook, & Aitken, 2011). The nature of the relationship between the foster care family and the birth family is of utmost importance to children. Developing a harmonious relationship is however a challenge.

### 1.2 | Difficulties experienced by foster care families

Literature recounts the various difficulties encountered by foster parents who must interact with a child's birth family. According to a study conducted by Sinclair, Wilson & Gibbs (2005b), most foster care families recognize and accept the importance of contact between children and their birth family. Nonetheless, a quarter of them experience or have experienced severe difficulties with the parents of the children they are caring for. These difficulties involve aggressive, violent, or inappropriate behaviour during contact or visits, frequent absences, and withdrawal by certain parents (Austerberry et al., 2013; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011). The foster parents likewise find it difficult to answer children's questions about their parents or the reasons for their placement, and feel powerless when confronted by the children's disappointment and distress when birth parents cancel or do not show up for a scheduled visit (Murray et al., 2011; Sen & McCormack, 2011). Various studies also point to the difficulties foster parents have when dealing with children's behaviour before or after contact. The child may express resistance or refuse contact (Murray et al., 2011). Foster parents sometimes have to manage the sadness or anger of the child following a contact he or she deems disappointing (Haight et al., 2002). The loss of credibility and influence experienced by some foster care parents when the biological parents discredit them in front of the child is also mentioned in the study of Moyers et al. (2006). All these behaviours contribute to negative attitudes from the foster parents about contact and makes them less interested in getting involved or supporting the relationship between the children and their birth parents (Cleaver, 2000; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011).

Less conflictual situations, such as maintaining contact between children and their birth parents, also present their share of challenges. Planning visits, transportation, and accompanying the children can all present difficulties for the foster carers (Murray et al., 2011; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000; Triseliotis et al., 2000). The gap that sometimes separates the two families about child raising, values, and household rules can also be an irritant for the foster care family (Moyers et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2011; Triseliotis et al., 2000). Triseliotis et al. (2000) maintain that cultural differences can be a source of tension between the two families, making it difficult to create a positive relationship.

Birth families' likewise encounter obstacles in their relationship with foster care families. Hojer (2009) states that birth parents tend to feel inferior to foster parents who seem doubtful about the birth parents' parenting skills. The stigmatization that parents experience when they are seen as "bad parents" affects their interactions with the foster care family, making the relationship asymmetric (Hojer, 2009; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2015). In a study examining the involvement of birth parents in the placement of their child with a foster care family, Poirier and Simard (2006) report that parents who think that the foster carers have a positive attitude towards their participation take part in more tasks regarding child raising and school activities than do those who think the foster parents are against their participation. A study by Andersson (2009) showed that children who had a "secure" attachment profile were also those whose foster parents spoke positively about the biological parents, listened to the children's disappointments, and accompanied them in difficult situations.

### 1.3 | The specificities of kinship foster families

In foster care, the issues at play in the relationships between KFFs and birth parents differ from those found between regular FFs and birth parents. Some studies show that children placed in KFFs have more contact with their birth parents (Metzger, 2008; Palacios & Jiménez, 2009) who remain more involved in their child's life, especially if they have a good relationship with the foster carers (Green & Goodman, 2010). It was also observed that children placed in KFFs, compared to those in regular FFs, have more contact with their siblings and their extended family (Farmer & Moyers, 2008). Geographic and physical proximity and knowing the people who are caring for the children are factors that facilitate contact (Holtan, Ronning, Handegard, & Sourander, 2005). However, greater frequency has not been observed in all studies (Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012).

Furthermore, some studies indicate that child welfare practitioners provide less supervision for contact situations with KFFs and birth parents, which leaves more room for unexpected and non-authorized contact (Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler, & Cox, 2007; Farmer, 2009; Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Terling-Watt, 2001). Consequently, the risk of leaving children with inadequate parents or putting them in a loyalty conflict situation are considered higher in KFFs than in FFs (Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley, 2009; Linares et al., 2010). According to Vanschoonlandt et al. (2012), tension between KFFs and the birth family stems from the ambiguity of respective roles and responsibilities. In the KFFs, several factors complicate the relationship between foster and birth parents: the interaction patterns in the family, the difficulty to establish boundaries, the foster parents' wish to maintain a

positive relationship with the birth parents, the obligation for them to supervise contact or to be present when parents come to visit their children (Aldgate & McIntosh, 2006; Hunt et al., 2010; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013, 2015). For example, a study by Farmer and Moyers (2008) found that there was conflict between the foster parents and birth parents in 54% of the KFF placements, as compared to 16% in regular FF placements. Linares et al. (2010) nonetheless observed a higher level of co-parental communication and support in KFFs than in FFs.

## 2 | METHODS

The data used in the present article come from a study assessing changes in the provincial Youth Protection Act. This important study took place between 2013 and 2015 and looked at the views of children, parents, and foster care families on legal measures intended to facilitate stability in child care, relationships, and living conditions. A section of this research focused more closely on the foster homes where the children were placed. This section's objective was to collect the foster parents' viewpoints on the challenges encountered by the new legal provisions of Youth Protection Act when implementing stability and permanency in a child's life; on the nature of interactions between families and other players involved in the child's situation (practitioners, professionals, and biological parents); and on the personal and professional resources that are used to help foster care families fulfil their mandate.

The research method involved semi-structured interviews with the foster care parents. A total of 45 families were met, with 30 FFs and 15 KFFs. Recruitment of the FFs was carried out in collaboration with the *Fédération des familles d'accueil et des ressources intermédiaires du Québec* (FFARIQ, Québec federation of foster families and interim resources). The federation disseminated the information about the research project to its members through a written publication and an oral presentation during their annual general assembly. Interested families were invited to communicate with the research team about participating in the project and setting up a meeting. For KFFs, contact was made through lists of children put in these types of placements in five youth centres in the Province of Québec between June 2013 and February 2014. Designated people from these establishments were the

first to contact the families to inform them about the project and contact modalities. Interested families could then contact the research team directly.

The interview focused on open-ended questions and was based on four main themes (Table 1). Subjects addressed in themes 2, 3, and 4 are inspired in part by previous studies with foster care families. These studies focused on elements that help or hinder placement and on factors that affect the quality and proper functioning of the foster care environment (Brown, 2008; Buehler, Cox, & Cuddeback, 2003); on the more difficult and stressful aspects related to the foster care family (Buehler et al., 2003); and on the foster care parents' sense of competence (Cooley & Petren, 2011).

### 2.1 | Participant profile

Data were collected from 45 families, with 30 FFs and 15 KFFs (Table 2). The respondents were primarily women ( $n = 36$ ), most of whom were in the 50 or over age bracket ( $n = 27$ ). More than half had a college or university education ( $n = 25$ ) and had a family income higher than \$40,000 per year ( $n = 30$ ). There were certain differences between the FF and KFF profiles regarding age, income, years of experience in foster care, and number of children cared for. The KFFs were younger (7/15 were under 40 years old, as compared to 3/30 in FFs), and had a lower family income (12/15 were below \$60,000, as compared to 10/30 in FFs). Moreover, most of the KFFs (11/15) had less than 5 years' experience in foster care, whereas the majority of the FFs (20/30) had accumulated over 10 years' experience. Data likewise indicated that there were more children per family in the FFs than in the KFFs: over half of the FFs (14/30) had three children or more, whereas all the KFFs ( $n = 15$ ) had either one child ( $n = 11$ ) or 2 ( $n = 4$ ).

### 2.2 | Data analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Their content was analysed using thematic content analysis (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2012), which consists in reviewing the interviews and dividing the content into themes (L'Écuyer, 1990; Mayer, et Deslauriers, dans Mayer, Ouellet, & Saint-Jacques et D. Turcotte, 2000). The initial definition of the categories of analysis was established in respect to the main

**TABLE 1** Themes and questions of the interviews

Themes	Semi-structured interview questions for foster care families and kinship foster care families
1-The role of foster care families in the planning of the children's future	What is the plan of permanency for this child? Have you been consulted about this plan? What is your opinion on this plan?
2-The daily challenges of foster care families	If we look at your experience as a foster care family, what do you find the most stressful or difficult? Which aspects are the most positives? As a foster care family what has changed for you since the Youth Protection Act was amended?
3-The personal and professional resources that are used to help foster care families to fulfil their mandate	What makes you competent as a foster care family? In your opinion, what are the characteristics and qualities that should be sought in families who wish to foster care?
4-The sense of competence in different spheres of practice	For this theme, we used the survey developed by Cooley and Petren (2011): "Included in the survey were twelve, four point Likert style questions that assessed foster parents' perceptions of confidence, from 'very confident' to 'not confident at all', in various domains of foster parenting" (Cooley & Petren, 2011: 1970). For each of these questions, the participant was also asked to comment and explain his answer.

**TABLE 2** Participant profiles

Type of family	Foster care family Kinship foster care family	30 15		Total N = 45
		FF N = 30	KFF N = 15	
Gender	Female	23	13	36 (80%)
	Male	7	2	9 (20%)
Age	18–29	—	1	1 (2%)
	30–39	3	6	9 (20%)
	40–49	6	2	8 (18%)
	50+	21	6	27 (60%)
Highest level of education	Elementary	1	2	3 (7%)
	High school	9	8	17 (38%)
	College	9	3	12 (27%)
	University	11	2	13 (29%)
Annual family income	Less than 20,000	2	2	4 (9%)
	\$20,000–39,999	3	6	9 (20%)
	\$40,000–59,999	5	4	9 (20%)
	\$60,000 and +	18	3	21 (47%)
	Information not available	2	0	2 (4%)
Number of children currently fostered	1 child	7	11	18 (40%)
	2 children	9	4	13 (29%)
	3 children and +	14	—	14 (31%)
Years of experience (as foster parents)	Less than 5 years	3	11	14 (31%)
	Between 5 and 10 years	7	4	11 (24%)
	More than 10 years	20	—	20 (44%)

themes addressed in the interview. After reading the first interviews, coding was adjusted; some codes were added while others were deleted or merged. Subsequently, two members of the research team independently coded the first interviews to ensure objectivity. All material and data related to biological parents were then grouped into one code. Following re-reading of the contents, the segments concerning the relationship with the birth parents as well as the foster carers' viewpoints about the birth parents were isolated and organized into finer categories. N'Vivo 10 software was used for the analysis and systematic organization of the material.

### 3 | RESULTS

This article takes a closer look at the relationship between foster parents and birth parents, where both roles are subject to negotiation

and redefinition. Analysis revealed the sub-themes in the relationship between foster and biological families from the perspective of the foster care families. Presence and quality of contacts between the child and his or her biological family, tensions and difficulties encountered between the two families, presence or absence of respect and trust, value afforded by the foster care families to maintain contact between the child and his or her biological family are all factors that have helped to determine how the two families “got along” in the joint family space, and helped to position each foster care family interviewed within the established profiles.

Table 3 shows the entire sample's situation for “parent–children” contact and the quality of the relationship between the two families. A compilation of results indicates that half of the FFs (15/29) had a good, generally positive relationship with the birth parents. KFF relationship results were different albeit close to what is described in literature, namely, that this relationship is more conflictual and

**TABLE 3** FF–KFF relationship profiles

Profile	Details	FFs (N = 29) <sup>a</sup>	KFFs (N = 15)	Total (N = 44)
BPs—very little involvement	Designates situations where the parents were no longer in contact with the child or where the parents were hardly involved and rarely saw the child.	6	2	8 (18%)
BPs present with positive relationship	Designates situations where the relationship between the two families was positive and marked by respect, confidence, and acknowledgement of the other people's role with the child.	15	2	17 (39%)
BPs present but difficult relationship	Designates situations where the parents were present but where the relationship between the two families was difficult, tense, and marked by competition, disappointment, and lack of confidence.	3	6	9 (20%)
Mediocre relationship	Designates situations where the foster parents accepted that there was contact but lamented nonetheless its negative impact; or situations where contact with one parent was positive but difficult with the other.	5	5	10 (23%)

<sup>a</sup>29 of 30 foster families were selected for analysis, since one of them did not comment the quality of relationships with birth parents.

BPs = biological parents; FFs = foster care families; KFFs = kinship foster care families.

problematic. Indeed, 11 of the 15 KFFs had a difficult or mediocre relationship with the birth parents, compared to 8 of the 29 FFs.

### 3.1 | The importance of maintaining relationships

Analysis of collected statements showed that the relationship with the birth family was difficult for some families, positive for others. Supporting the children's relationship with their birth parents was however a clear objective for the foster care families. It was vital for them that the children maintain contact with their birth family and that the parents remain significant in the children's eyes:

*I think it's important that the children also have a positive relationship with their birth parents. Like this morning (for a visit), I dressed him up in clothes that his mother gave him. I try to create a positive relationship, and every month, I send his mother photos of the little guy with notes about what he has done here (FF 03).*

*We also tell Nicholas<sup>1</sup>: "You've got a mother. Your mother loves you a lot, but when you were a little baby, there were things your mommy didn't know how to do. Some things were too difficult for her." I always try to make sure that the biological mother stays in their lives (FF 17).*

To maintain good relationships with the birth parents, foster carers avoided judging them, and instead accepted their limitations:

*This is probably one of my strengths, but, you know, I'm not inclined to judge the biological parents. I tell myself, 'We don't all have same background and we don't all react the same way'. So I try to respect them and I think it makes the relationship between the foster family, the child, and the parent better (FF 25).*

Foster parents also tried to ensure that the children saw the advantages of keeping in contact with their birth parents and to better deal with the difficulties that stem from the birth parents being involved in their lives.

*I always try to show the advantages of family because there are always advantages. Even among people who have lots of problems, there are advantages. (...) I tell the children that their family is important and that it will always be there, will always be around (FF 07).*

Foster parents were aware that their attitude affected the quality of the relationship between children and their birth parents: "Respect for the biological parent is always important. We're not there to judge because we don't know if we would have done any better in their situation!" (FF 30). However, in certain circumstances, the birth parents' behaviour can undermine the foster parents' trust in them, making them more hesitant about maintaining ties. For example, Nadia (foster mother) grumbled that, during a non-supervised visit, the father said to the child that he would come and take him back, even though he knew that this was not planned. This unfounded expectation had a negative effect on the child:

*The father would say things like, "It's temporary, daddy is going to come and take you back." All things you shouldn't be saying. It completely upset Thomas. But the father said these things when I wasn't there, because he knew he didn't have the right to do it (KFF 02).*

Accepting the placement is a key element in developing a positive relationship between the two families. When the birth parents accepted the placement, and could acknowledge that their children were moving forward, they were more inclined to cooperate with the foster parents: "I understand very, very well why they react like that. They're angry, and then slowly, they begin to trust us and admit the child is making progress" (FF 03). When birth parents contested the placement, were angry, or refused to let the child become a part of the foster care family, a climate of competition and rivalry would ensue, undermining the relationship between the two families.

### 3.2 | Negotiating cultural and educational differences

A child's placement in foster care often reveals the socio-economic and cultural differences between foster and biological parents. This may create certain confrontations about values, lifestyles, and educational methods. In the present study, in so much as foster carers considered that the children were safe, they were generally tolerant: "Actually, he's always been quite nice and I'm not worried about Vincent's safety. You know, he eats really bad, and the apartment's full of smoke, but that's not going to kill him one day a month" (FF 09). However, when the gap was too wide in terms of values or supervision, or if foster parents noticed behaviour problems when the children returned—which was interpreted as a sign of emotional wounds—this created a certain level of hesitation about contact between children and their birth parents. For example, Alex, 14, had been living with Josée and Louis for 3 years and would continue to do so until he reached the age of majority. They were worried because he had started seeing his father again and spending weekends at his place:

*I'd say that sometimes, the less contact they have with their parents, the better it is. (...) When he comes back sometimes, you see that he's tired because he hasn't slept at night. Here, he goes to bed and has a normal life, but there, sometimes, it's all disorganized. (...) His behaviour changes: he becomes aggressive, grumpy, he answers back, all things he didn't do before he started sleeping there weekends (FF 04).*

Contact sometimes became a source of tension when the foster care family felt that it caused prejudice to the children's well-being or confronted the foster carers' values:

*As far as I'm concerned, it (maintaining contact) makes no sense. The grandparents say it out loud, they say they don't recognize you as parents. They put the child in a conflict of loyalty. (...) The last time, when the two brothers came back, Julian had his biggest attachment crisis yet. It's been getting worse for some time now, but this time it was really bad (FF 29).*

<sup>1</sup>All the names have been changed to protect the participants' anonymity.

Likewise, some foster parents had a hard time understanding and accepting what they saw as the birth parents' abandonment and indifference towards their children. Their lack of interest in what their children were doing, cancelling visits, and hurtful and offensive words towards their children were all examples that foster parents raised to illustrate their discomfort:

*The emotions when parents cancel and all the other stuff... I put myself in the child's place, it's just one disappointment after another. I have a hard time dealing with it. (...) I can't understand a parent who does that to a child (KFF 03).*

The problems experienced by birth parents (alcohol and drugs, mental health problems, incarceration, aggressive behaviour, etc.) also had an impact on the relationship with the foster parents. For example, Louise's 16-year-old granddaughter (her daughter's daughter) had been living with her for the last 6 months and she had been dealing well with her mother's visits. Nonetheless, Louise had to manage tension linked to her daughter's drinking problems and the dissatisfaction she sometimes expressed regarding the frequency of contact:

*I don't stop her from seeing her daughter, not at all. When my daughter wants to come and sleep here for a night and spend a day or two with her daughter, I have no problem with that. But sometimes, it's not very easy when she phones and starts carping at me because it's been a week that she hasn't seen her daughter. My daughter has a borderline personality. She's had drug problems and has drinking problems. I've learned to put some distance between me and her problems. She doesn't want to admit that she has a problem (KFF 09).*

### 3.3 | Specific issues for kinship foster families

When families agreed to take in a child as KFFs, contact was often seen from a much different angle because these foster families already knew the birth parents and often had to deal with a familial and geographical proximity with its own specific challenges. When a child was placed in a KFF, child welfare services were generally less involved in the birth parents' contacts and visits. In certain cases, the court proposed that the KFFs take responsibility for the visits and, when necessary, for forbidding visits (e.g., if the parent showed up intoxicated or became aggressive or violent):

*The social worker had to supervise visits. Before that, I was the one who supervised contact because the mother didn't want anything to do with social workers. I used to do it, but then we had a clash and she threatened me. So I called the social worker and I told her that it was finished, I wouldn't be doing any more supervising of visits (KFF 11).*

The more informal nature of the placement and the birth parents' access to the foster care family with whom the children were living made it difficult for the KFFs to manage their relationships with other members of the extended family. This was the case for Chantal who was fostering two nephews, one 16-year-old and one 14-year-old.

They were forbidden to have contact with their father, her uncle. "It's difficult because it's family. (...) We're there to supervise. My uncle is their father. What do I do?! He's my uncle" (KFF 05). Consequently, the roles in KFFs were not as well-defined as in FFs. This situation led to disagreements and confusion about respective responsibilities. The KFFs' closer ties with the children and parents led them to have to defend both their interests:

*When her mother showed up drunk one night, Mary said, 'Oh, just shut the door in her face.' So I stood up for the mother, 'Your mother is not in good shape, but that doesn't mean you should be impolite with her.' But when her mother insists on talking to her, I stand up for Mary. I go back and forth between the two, bending like a reed. (KFF 07).*

Although the KFFs' parental role with the children was consented and attributed to them by the courts, it was sometimes out of step with the ties that linked them to the children's parent. One mother, for example, thought it was unthinkable to take a stand against her daughter in court:

*If there's one thing I don't want, it's to go testify against my daughter. I keep saying to myself, "Who's going to help her if she turns her back on me and no longer talks to me?" Who will be there to help her? (KFF 15).*

Accordingly, KFFs felt that they were responsible for the children, whereas others felt guilty. This was the case for Solange, a grandmother who had been taking care of her 3-year-old grandson full-time for almost 2 years:

*It's been difficult (the placement) because my son is the father. Whatever way you look at it, I raised him. He is what he is at least partly because of who I am. And now he has his own life. It was difficult to tell him, 'Look, you're welcome to come here when you want, but the priority here is Samuel, not you. You can take care of yourself now' (KFF 03).*

To overcome inherent relationship difficulties, the KFFs made the children's well-being a priority:

*I don't think I should be scared to stand up to my sister. I have to think about Alyson and only Alyson. Because when I think about all the other difficult things around me ... I really have to focus on Alyson's well-being. Because the rest of it is pretty difficult to put up with. The family arguments and all that, it's really hard. And Alyson shouldn't see anything either, because I don't want her to feel guilty. So I think the first goal is to really focus on her needs (KFF-10).*

## 4 | DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

When children are placed in foster care, it is agreed that they should keep in contact with the members of their birth family (Farmer &

Moyers, 2008; Hunt et al., 2010; Sinclair, Baker, Gibbs, & Wilson, 2005a). In the present study, foster carers were thus aware that they must deal with the birth parents and consider them as key players. Foster carers state that their relationships with the birth families were generally viable and that both parties got along reasonably well. Even though parents followed by child welfare services will encounter various problems, results show that foster care families were generally inclined to recognize the biological family's influence in the child's life. In the cases where relationships were more difficult, the children's negative experiences during visits often led to disagreement and tensions between foster and birth parents. Analysis of the interviews with the foster carers shows that the quality of the relationship dynamics depended on several factors and varied with the frequency of contact, birth parents' characteristics, and foster parents' attitudes. This observation highlights the importance of personalized planning and supervision during contact and visits (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2015; Selwyn, 2004; Triseliotis, 2010).

Cases studied here likewise showed that maintaining a positive relationship required adjustments on both sides. Foster care families had to be open-minded about the birth parents, able to recognize their contributions, and accept their limitations. If foster care families wished to maintain harmonious relationships with the birth parents, they were to avoid judging them and to accept the fact that the children may be exposed to a different lifestyle and values when in contact with their birth family. Moreover, Neil, Beek et Schofiels's study on the attitudes of adoptive and foster parents' towards post-placement contact shows that "the most successful contact arrangements were those in which the parents or carers demonstrated high levels of empathy or sensitivity towards the child and the birth parent" (2003: 415). For their part, the birth parents, according to foster carers, should accept the placement, and let the child become part of the foster care families, particularly in long-term placement. They should also admit that foster parents can become meaningful for the child and "allow" him/her to develop a relationship with them.

Furthermore, the results bear witness to the influence of the type of placement, placements in KFFs showing a greater tendency (than those in regular FFs) to create conflict and tension between the parties. The geographical and familial proximity between kinship foster carers and biological parents can either be beneficial or disruptive. The results of this study show that, to compensate for the negative effects that this situation may have on children, the KFF tend to prioritize the child's well-being and interest in their decisions. This attitude helped them to better deal with their uncomfortable position, and to justify various choices made regarding the birth parents. Given the specificity of placements in the extended family and the potential conflict between the two families previously noted in the literature (Aldgate & McIntosh, 2006; Brown & Sen, 2014; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013, 2015; Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012), KFFs should be provided with a different accompaniment that considers the particular context in which these families carry out their mandate. This proposal is even more justified in terms of practices where, per various studies (Borenstein & McNamara, 2015; Liao & White, 2014; Sakai, Lin, & Flores, 2011), KFFs are generally less informed about existing services and less inclined to seek support from child welfare services.

The existence of a respectful relationship between foster care families and biological families also depends on the accompaniment

offered by social practitioners. Too often, supervised contact and visits are primarily seen as moments where children can meet with a parent: foster parents only partially involved in conducting the visit and often relegated to a secondary role (Austerberry et al., 2013; Morrison et al., 2011; Nesmith, 2013). And yet, well-supervised visits by social practitioners can be used to foster exchanges and discussions about the children between both families (Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000; Sen & McCormack, 2011). For example, a recent study by Withington, Borton, Lonne, and Evers (2016) reveals that questioned foster families believe that the success and stability of placement depend on the quality of the relationship and the capacity of foster care families and case workers to develop positive relationship dynamics. Case workers should promote an approach that involves the development of an inclusive relational dynamic focused on tolerance, empathy, and mutual respect.

#### 4.1 | Limitations

This study had some limitations, the first being related to the participants' profile. First, only foster care families were interviewed in this study; children and biological parents did not express their thoughts about the relationship. Regarding methodology, open-ended questions provide more details on people's perceptions about specific subjects. However, the level of generalization is limited. In the present study, this method made it possible to explore the views and experiences of foster care families on their relationship with the child's biological family. However, their positions are not necessarily representative of all foster care families. Furthermore, the foster children's profiles varied considerably from one case to another regarding age, placement trajectory, age at the time of placement, long-term placement, and mental health and behavioural problems. Although this approach allowed us to capture a wide variety of views and to shed light on the complexity of the issues and challenges confronting foster care families, it might also have led to considerable differences in the participants' statements on certain themes.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

By their presence, attitude towards the birth family and preparation of the children for contact and visits, FFs, considerably impact how these children deal with their attachment and feelings of belonging to two families (Andersson, 2009; Neil et al., 2003; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). The present paper sheds light on the family dynamics that characterize parent-child contact and on the role played by the foster parents in this context. Further studies will be necessary to better understand how the mutual attitudes of the foster carers and birth parents impact on the children's behaviour and their ability to handle the fact that they are part of two families. Ultimately, understanding this aspect will make it easier to plan contact and visits and work with foster care families and birth parents while nurturing the child's well-being.

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