

Qualitative report Italy

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Focus group 1

Participants: 2 stipendiary magistrates, 2 honorary magistrates, 2 lawyers, 1 head of the Juvenile Justice Centre (USSM), 1 head of juvenile social services.

Place: University of the Salento Department of Juridical sciences

Duration: 82 minutes

1. **What do you think of foster care? What would you say are its strong and weak points, from your professional viewpoint?** **(Duration 29 minutes)**

We believe foster care to be an extraordinary resource that should be valued because young people need to grow up in a family. Despite the clear and unequivocal statutory indications, in its practical application foster care has not fulfilled the expectations of legislators for a series of reasons. First and foremost, the practice was conceived for cases of minors who were temporarily deprived of the support of their family of origin, whereas in practice it is often used for minors in a state of permanent semi-abandonment, in order to get round the obstacles to adoption.

Secondly, there is the seriously poor level of training among the personnel and the difficulty of establishing a network among the services involved. Lastly, there is no real culture in this society of fostering as a preventative measure, which impedes its application. In addition, it is affected by so much prejudice that placing the minor in residential care is often preferred to fostering. The difficulty of finding suitable families is exacerbated by the lack of adequate assistance from social services for both the birth families, with a view to helping them acquire the necessary parenting skills, and the foster families, who are often confused about roles and functions and feel that the level of support provided does not match their motivation.

Such support needs to be both financial and psychological, but should also include rapid intervention at critical moments. The main advantage of fostering is the maintenance of family ties in a family context, because only the family can ensure that young people receive an adequate upbringing. Frequently the fault is not just of social services but also of lawyers, who limit their focus to the situation of the specific young person in question without considering the bigger picture.

It is obviously necessary to distinguish between cases on the basis of the young person's age and whether the fostering is a purely civil matter or concerns young people in conflict with the law. Ironically, some young people in the latter situation have already experienced the failure of fostering in a civil context.

2. **Do you believe that foster care can cause young people with a difficult past to change? What type of change can a foster family produce that other approaches cannot?** **(Duration 14 minutes)**

Fostering can produce a change in young people if the foster family takes responsibility not just for the young person in question but also for the family of origin. In cases where this is not possible it is necessary to draw up a different plan, which however must be clear to all, above all to the young person, in whom change can be positive if they are helped to grow adequately and reflect objectively on their family of origin. Clarity is also needed concerning the type of fostering, i.e. whether it is by consent or legally imposed, so as to avoid creating false expectations. The foster family can be the driver of change if they invest in rules, respect and affection but they must be supported, as must the family of origin.

Rules imposed by means of an affective relationship are more effective on the young person and this is what makes the family a winning formula. Obviously for minors above the age of 14, in both the criminal and civil contexts, assistance and affection need to be accompanied by a certain level of professionalism. There is no doubt that for minors subject to probation foster families are an extraordinary resource, if the family of origin gives its consent.

**3. What type of suggestions would you make concerning the contribution of the educational system? How should it change in order to be of greater help to families and above all to young people?
(Duration 15 minutes)**

The educational system must support the objectives of fostering by means of inclusion programmes designed to avoid the marginalisation of young people at risk. Unfortunately, often the school is not a partner of the juvenile justice system. Indeed, in many cases it is barely able even to flag up risk situations for the young person, thereby preventing rapid or pre-emptive intervention.

A widespread lack of courage means that there is frequently little cooperation between the school and the wider social environment and the young person's opportunities for change are thus reduced. In those cases where schools do implement individualised projects for young people in difficulty, with the agreement of both the original and the foster families, the results are clear, as for example with some young offenders.

But we are dealing here with a small number of sporadic cases, unfolding spontaneously in the absence of resources in the social fabric. It is necessary to activate virtuous circles in order to inculcate a more positive approach to fostering and overcome prejudice and it is here that schools need to play a role in promoting projects and initiatives that avoid the creation of ghettos.

**4. From your point of view, what are the obstacles to fostering and how can they be overcome?
(Duration 15 minutes)**

The obstacles to foster care are widespread fear and diffidence and the difficulties experienced by foster families in their relationships with the families of origin in cases where fostering has been imposed without their agreement. Overcoming these obstacles requires that the host families are provided with support and adequate training, although compassion and affection cannot be induced and fostering is thus always a challenge. In addition, it is necessary to take account of the young person's difficulty in relating to another family, especially since he or she often prefers to be placed in residential care. This being the case, the young person also needs to be made aware of the benefits of

care within a family. One way of overcoming these obstacles would be to jointly construct the fostering plan with all parties involved, people and services, ensuring enhanced motivation and awareness among families and providing adequate support every step of the way. Shared responsibility for the fostering plan from the beginning would be of help above all to fostering young offenders, where there is a lower risk of confusion of roles and hence conflict among the parties involved. If a young person can be placed in a foster family in their area of origin, it is always preferable to residential care, since the relevant institutions are few in number and are often far from familiar places, undermining the active citizenship programmes that are fundamental for the recovery of troubled young people.

**5. We agree on the value of fostering and all of us consider it to be preferable to the alternatives, but are there any situations in which you would not use it? Are there cases in which it is not advisable?
(Duration 3 minutes)**

If available, we would always choose this solution, except in cases that require either specific clinical treatment or enhanced deterrence, for example in the case of repeated re-offending.

**6. What can be the role of foster families in the implementation of the European Union project for “child-friendly justice” and the promotion of active citizenship?
(Duration 6 minutes)**

Foster parents can help the young people in their care to make the right life choices if the programmes are staffed by adequately trained personnel. Clearly this requires the courage to invest in new resources, whose economic value needs to be considered in the light of the fact that keeping young people in residential care is extremely costly.

MODERATOR'S CONSIDERATIONS

The first focus group is made up of figures who are connected in various ways with the field of juvenile justice. There is however a clear division into two currents, one composed of persons with legal training who stress the ambiguity of a juvenile justice system torn between a focus on care and the desire to punish, and the other, unfortunately a minority, with a background in the humanities, who are drawn to reflect on the question of needs and resources.

The moderator felt uneasy during the focus, due to the dominant presence of certain participants who took up a disproportionate amount of time answering the questions. Their extended contributions to the discussion caused the moderator to worry constantly about being able to finish on time. The sensation was that of excessively self-referential comments that detracted from a full and balanced discussion among experts.

Focus Group 2

Participants: 2 professionals working in a youth detention centre; 2 psychologists; 1 psychiatrist; 1 social worker; 1 lawyer.

Place: University of the Salento, Department of Legal Sciences.

(Duration: 90 minutes)

1. In your opinion, what do foster parents need – in terms of assistance, financial contributions, practical help, skills, training – to enable them to successfully take care of troubled youths between the ages of 10 and 17? (Duration 21 minutes)

The question drew a series of joint reflections, with multiple needs emerging.

The first (cited many times in the course of the question and throughout the focus) is the need to know the child's history: where they come from, what their experiences are and what their daily reality is like. Indeed, very often, the knowledge gap is so wide that the foster family is unable to deal with the issues arising from the young person's environment of origin.

Closely linked to the first need is the need to provide training for foster families, who often do not have the tools to manage the children and their problems, especially in the case of young offenders.

There is also a need for clear and efficient planning on the part of the services providing support to foster families (an aspect that emerged in Focus 1) and the families of origin. This entails drawing up an educational and growth plan that is shared by all parties involved, in order to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts, particularly between the family of origin and the foster family.

There is a need to identify and study in greater detail the motivation of foster families, in the sense of understanding the reasons behind their decision. This could be a useful tool for assessing the suitability of foster parents, in that it shifts the focus towards the image they have of fostering and their expectations, rather than just personal, psychological and parenting skills. It would also help to avoid the failures, often caused by unfulfilled expectations. In addition, a greater understanding of their motivations would help to generate more suitable "matchings" between young people and foster families by better combining interpersonal and intra-psychic structures. Indeed, in the absence of a list of foster families to refer to, services often turn to couples who have expressed their willingness to adopt a child and thus presumably have other motivations.

Key points concerning question 1.

1. In terms of training and planning one proposal that has emerged is for psychological support to be continuous, provided not only at the moment when the young person enters the family, but for the whole period of foster care, in order to highlight any problems and find the right solution.
2. In terms of motivation one proposal that has emerged is to get the foster families to participate in the daily life of the detention centre where the young person is being held, as a first step in getting to know the child who is to be placed in their care. This would permit a more gradual integration of the child into the family, enabling them to get to know the young person and their history, allowing any incompatibilities or problems to emerge at an earlier stage.

2. Seen from the point of view of foster parents or in your various professional roles, is taking care of young people in conflict with the law different from taking care of young people with other sorts of problems? If yes, in what way?

In other words, in your opinion, does a young person of 16 in conflict with the law need the same type of family as a young person of 16 who has a disastrous background in civil terms but is classed as being merely “at risk”?
(Duration 14 minutes)

In this case too, the responses were consistent and shared by all the group's components, who hold that there are no substantial differences between taking care of a young person who has problems with the criminal justice system and one who has been placed in residential care by a civil order. Indeed, at the heart of the matter there is a need (which all the participants consider a given) for the young person in question to experience different relationships, regardless of whether their behaviour is stigmatised on a criminal or civil level. There is a need therefore to enable the young person to establish relationships that enable him/her to grow, guided by educators and family members.

What can be more problematic is the bureaucratic aspect, which in the case of the criminal justice system is more demanding.

Rather than considering the different situations dictated by the young person's area of provenance (civil or criminal), it would thus be more appropriate to assess the young person's individual situation and life experiences case by case, in order to find the right family for them with a plan of intervention that is highly detailed and even tailor-made (an aspect that emerged in Focus 1).

There is therefore no such thing as a family suited to criminal cases and one for civil cases. There needs to be the right family for the specific issues pertaining to each young person. The discussion thus returns to the themes of training, preparation, awareness, motivation. These are the necessary starting points for finding the family best adapted to each case: a family which, as we have said, will need to be followed and supported every step of the way.

3. What effects of detention have you observed on the young people you work with? Have you noticed any effects of applying restrictive measures in your experience?
(Duration 20 minutes)

The third question provided a variety of points for reflection and analysis. While the group was prepared to listen and engage with the different responses, often closely linked, it broadly split into two camps.

On one side, some participants stated firmly and without hesitation that the first and main effect of detention on the young people is anger, expressed in various forms: disbelief, resentment, hostility, aggressiveness, fear, solitude and confusion.

This anger is often supported and fuelled by the young person's family of origin, who cannot understand why he or she is being subjected to this step and the angry young person does not understand how they ended up in a situation of losing their liberty “without having done anything wrong”.

Starting from this assumption, the participants who highlighted this effect stressed that if the professionals working with the young person in the youth detention centre do their job well, then it is possible to initiate a process of understanding that leads the young person to see the factors that induced them to break the law and hence caused them to incur restrictive measures.

In this sense then, the recovery plan for the young person can have great potential, guiding them towards a change in their lifestyle and prompting them to ask themselves not "Why am I here?", but "Why did I do this? What do I need to do to avoid ending up in this situation again?"

In contrast, other participants stressed that rather than anger, the most evident effect of detention on young people is resignation. This resignation can however lead to a more constructive attitude on the part of the young person who, obliged to live in a state of restricted freedom, i.e. in a regulated context, passes from a restive and (in this case too) angry phase, to one in which "they let themselves be led by the hand" and begin a process of change. In some cases however, the resignation arises not from the young person's awareness, but from a conviction that they can do nothing else but accept their fate, knowing that the restrictive measures will one day come to an end and they can go back to living how they please.

In addition, detention also has a social effect arising from stigmatisation, with consequences for the young person's psyche and behaviours.

There are three key points to add to these reflections.

The first came from one of the participants who pointed out that the effects depend on whether the young person has already spent time in a youth detention centre or only has experience of non-criminal residential care.

The former feel like gang bosses. They act arrogantly but behave well, albeit with some reticence. They display anger as an immediate effect but are easier to manage. The latter "know how to take adults for a ride"; they appear to adapt to the context, know the rules and accept the measures imposed on them, but in the long term experience greater difficulty in their personal growth. They know how to trick people and are highly manipulative. In this case too however, anger is the clearest and most immediate effect. The second key point came from a participant who pointed out that perhaps the real challenge of fostering is precisely this: if well prepared, the foster family can adequately manage these feelings on the part of the young person and guide them in a process of personal and interpersonal growth. It is the family then, rather than a youth detention centre, that can guarantee substantial progress by the young person.

In contrast, the third point concerns the delays in acting on the part of social services and stresses the importance of rapid intervention, both in the initial phases of the recovery process and as it unfolds. The institutions then must accelerate the legal process, since the time factor is fundamental in this phase of the young person's life.

4. From your point of view, in what way can fostering, in both the remand phase and while serving their sentence, help young people in conflict with the law? (Duration 22 minutes)

This question yielded one of the most interesting points of the entire focus, since one

participant responded by pointing out that fostering “serves to learn what a family is. [...] Young people at times marvel when they see families that live in a certain way. Being in a family is a source of learning about an approach to life that young people really need. They get to see a family context that is different from their own and this experience is needed. It is fundamental”.

Other comments mentioned how fostering gives the young person points of reference that they often lack, although they may seek them. That is, the young person needs someone who will take them in, show them affection and accept them for what they are, while being able to accompany them in a process of growth.

Indeed, the young person needs to be recognised, noticed as well as guided. If this happens then a relationship is established. If this doesn't happen, the young person explodes in acts of anger and crime, which are ways to be seen and to draw the attention of adults.

At this point, the question became more specific, i.e.:

Let us reflect a moment on the feasibility of placing a young offender in a foster family. In your view, is this practicable? What are the obstacles that would prevent this from being put into practice? Would the families be ready? Do they even exist? What impediments are there?

According to the participants there are three impediments to the implementation of such a fostering plan.

The first is the type of crime committed. Indeed, some so-called extreme crimes often generate forms of prejudice that induce families to not accept the young person. Another important obstacle, highlighted by most of the participants, is the lack of a culture of fostering *tout court* (an aspect that emerged in Focus 1 and will also be highlighted in Focus 3). To this may be added obstacles more closely linked to the criminal justice system itself, such as the type of crime, the young person's age and the specific issues affecting him or her.

Furthermore, the problem lies not so much in finding a willing family as in providing them with continuous support; leaving them on their own during the period of foster care would risk failure, by which is meant not the resumption of criminal activity on the part of the young person, but the failure to establish valid interpersonal relations.

In addition, it is felt that too much responsibility falls on the family, with the parents often left to manage on their own, which is why constant support in all phases of fostering is needed.

Another obstacle to the implementation of such a foster care plan is the family of origin, who are often more favourable to the young person being placed in residential care or a youth detention centre because they fear being compared to the foster family. Lastly, since the world of the criminal justice system is extremely diversified, with a broad range of personal situations, in order for fostering to truly be a resource it is necessary to have an individualised plan, made to measure for the minor in question, which meets all his or her specific needs.

5. The Daphne III project lies within the framework of European Union initiatives to

promote what has been called "child-friendly justice". These initiatives seek to promote, above all in young people who have problems with the justice system, a strong and positive sense of citizenship and they seek to do this while respecting their human rights and their needs as young people. In addition to everything that has come out of these points for reflection and analysis I want to ask you: in your opinion, what else is necessary or needs to be done in this direction to implement this project?

(Duration 12 minutes)

To this last question of the focus the participants gave different – but not contrasting – answers which in some cases were simply a restatement of concepts already expressed. In other cases however there were original and significant points for reflection.

Generally speaking, particular attention was placed on the fact that "child-friendly justice" is one that listens and respects the minor. Respect on the part of institutions and law enforcement agencies is fundamental if we are to avoid definitively destroying the already fragile personality of the minor who, if handled in the wrong way, may tend towards an interior destruction that is hard to remedy. What is needed therefore is listening and respect, where listening means getting minors to speak and knowing how to talk to them. Indeed, in this important phase, one of the participants pointed out that friendship is an interpersonal relation and thus child-friendly justice is one that manages to establish a relationship with the minor. This means that the rule must be applied, but there are "ways and ways" (as one participant said), i.e. good and bad approaches to its application. It is advisable therefore to adopt ways that do not attack the minors, that on the contrary listen to them and let them speak, helping them to feel part of a system that enables respectful dialogue and consideration of the opinions of all.

In addition, child-friendly justice is also personalised justice, i.e. a contextualised justice that always takes account of the young person's history.

Moreover, child-friendly justice should give young people opportunities (recreational, social, occupational) appropriate to their age, in which young people can test themselves and build up their self-esteem.

Lastly, worthy of note is the observation of one participant who stressed that child-friendly justice is one that also takes account of the people who work with the young person on a daily basis, whose work is not easy. That is, child-friendly justice must be realistic; it must consider that dealing with young people means putting up with a lot and "carrying them around with you". It is a labour, a burden, a commitment. And thus a welcoming and non-judgemental approach is required for both the young person and the professionals working with them, who, in the case of the youth detention centre, are with the young person day and night.

It is therefore desirable for the justice system to have an overall and integrated vision of the reality of fostering, including all its aspects and the issues affecting all parties involved.

OBSERVATIONS

The second focus involved professionals associated in various ways with the local social services.

From the first question, the group seemed to be balanced, homogeneous and substantially

in agreement. The answers given were never diametrically opposed, although in some cases, different points for reflection and analysis emerged, complementing the discussion. There was no sign of contradictory visions and each participant was attentive to the point of view of their interlocutors, in many cases expressing praise and appreciation.

Certain key themes formed a common thread to the entire discussion:

1. The importance of consideration and assessment of the history of the individual young person and the need to draw up personalised fostering plans.
2. The importance of training for foster families and the provision of constant support to them during the entire period of foster care.
3. The fundamental need to (i) explore the factors that motivate foster parents to welcome the minor into their home and (ii) to maintain a constant relationship with the family of origin. The latter is often seen as an obstacle to the positive implementation of a fostering plan.
4. The need also emerged for clear planning that embraces all parties involved in the field of fostering, for which the participants believe there are no substantial differences (except on a bureaucratic level) between the criminal and civil contexts.
5. There was a clear emphasis on the importance of the family, understood as a space in which the minor can establish interpersonal relations that they have never experienced before, a place where they can find educational reference points that accompany them in their process of growth, increasing the possibilities of change and enabling the young person to test themselves and to increase their self-confidence.
6. Lastly, attention was drawn to the heavy responsibility and serious commitment of the staff and their need to be supported (just like the young people) by the institutions, helping people to understand the burdensome nature of their task and enhancing their professional skill.

The focus enabled us to experience the reality of the practice of fostering and opened up a new road towards improving our knowledge of the theme.

Indeed, the participants of Focus 1 were the institutions – it was centred on the strictly legal aspects, focusing attention on the law and its application as a preventive panacea for problems linked to fostering and juvenile delinquency. In contrast, the second focus drew the attention more towards the needs of the young person and the daily dynamics of fostering.

Thus, while in the first focus the main idea was that of preventive and generalised legislative control able to resolve the worst problems associated with fostering, as well as the idea that the more information is acquired on the theme, the easier it is to act and achieve “guaranteed” results, in the second focus the main idea was more experimental, cognitivist if you will, according to which fostering is something that is achieved one day at a time, always with new input, gradually building up skills. It does not offer guaranteed solutions but can entail (and should entail) constant forms of experimentation that cannot be generalised but can be personalised, so that more positive and lasting results can be achieved.

FOCUS GROUP 3

Participants: 5 Adults, representatives of the families of origin and of the foster families.

Place: Social services for minors office, Lecce

Duration: 71 minutes.

1. What was the reaction of the young person when they heard that they were being arrested or committed for trial or taken away from their homes or, in more basic terms, that the juvenile justice system was taking an interest in them? (Duration: 28 minutes)

The participants responded to the question in different ways, reflecting the different reactions of the young people involved.

In some cases the immediate reaction was to deny the deed or its seriousness. In other cases, the reaction to the news of their arrest was confusion, fear and impotence, accompanied by an appeal to the parents in the hope they would “save” the young person from the trouble they had got themselves into.

In other cases again, the reaction was one of shame and guilt, of cutting themselves off, leading to a refusal on the part of the young person to meet and discuss the situation even with an idealised adult and seeking at all to avoid any kind of interaction. The last effect reported was anger.

Despite these dissimilar immediate reactions however, all participants stressed that the news of either probation or temporary deprivation of freedom subsequently led to a clear awareness on the part of the young person of what they had done: “It was then that they realised what they had done”, say some.

With the passage of time, all the affected young people, each at their own pace, improved their behaviour, becoming more responsible and showing remorse for their crimes. In one of the cases examined, for the young person probation “became an opportunity, a chance, since during the process of reintegration back into society and starting a job, he developed a sense of trust and serenity”. Unfortunately progress of this kind is sometimes undermined by the slow pace at which the objectives of the recovery project are achieved.

A key point from this first question is the observation by a (birth) mother whose son was arrested and “interned” for four days in a youth detention centre. Though convinced that this restriction did her son some good, she also says: “I don't think it would have been positive if (my son) had been held for any longer than that. [...] He regretted doing what he did and then, those places can't really rehabilitate them; there is a coldness, there are people who work there and for those who work there it's just a job; you're a package to be managed as part of their daily routine.”

2. In your view, have you received adequate support from the social services? (Duration: 2 minutes)

The second question saw the participants more at ease and better able to keep to the timing required by the focus.

The speed of the response was also linked to the fact that all, whether responding directly or by nodding emphatically, were of the same opinion: they have received adequate support from the social services.

One (birth) mother even claimed to be in serious need of the support of the social services, since she realised that she did not know how to act in that situation. This even entailed her son's social worker becoming *her* social worker as well, a person that the mother always turns for solid advice on what to do.

NB: As the focus continued however, specific questions by the moderator were met with negative observations concerning the social services, meaning that the initial emphasis and certainty manifested by all participants in response to this question was subsequently weakened.

3. Do you think that the social services could have done more besides what was offered and was satisfactory?
(Duration: 2 minutes)

Only one component of the group responded to this third question, a mother separated from her husband (birth family) who stated that the social services should have involved the father more, giving him greater responsibility, both to relieve her of part of the burden (she said she felt she been under house arrest together with her son), and to safeguard the father-son relationship via greater participation on the part of the father in the young person's daily life.

During the answer the others were silent and did not intervene. Just one other (birth) mother nodded in agreement while listening to the speaker but another (an adoptive mother and former foster mother), in response to the moderator's question, shook her head in disagreement, implying that social services could not have done any more to help.

4. Of all the help that you received, what was fundamental or indispensable and what was less so?
(Duration: 9 minutes)

This question enabled some participants to bring up other negative aspects of the work of the social services that they had experienced.

In contrast other participants reaffirmed their positive impression of the work of the social services in response to these problems.

To the first case belongs the answer of one component of the group (birth uncle, now foster parent) who said that although the social services had done a great deal, they could have done more. Specifically, he complained about their late intervention, which had repercussions for both the minor's birth family, which did not receive adequate and timely psychological support, and for the young person, for whom this delay also had negative

psychological repercussions, fuelling a lack of self-esteem that worsened a situation which already required serious attention. “If they had been faster, or at least had let the family know earlier (about things the social services already knew or could have guessed) then perhaps this resource [i.e. fostering] could have been used earlier and better and perhaps would have produced better results” (an aspect that emerged in Focus 1).

Of a different opinion were other participants who reaffirmed that the social services helped them a great deal, including provision of psychological support.

NB: The same participant who highlighted the slow response of the social services also stressed that the parents were often accompanied by other professionals, such as lawyers, who were often more interested in their client and treated the minor more like an instrument through which to advance the claims of one parent or another. Such professionals, sometimes incompetent or poorly trained, fill the heads of parents (already confused and disoriented) with a series of prejudices against social workers, which can obstruct their immediate and effective intervention.

In response to this observation the other participants nodded and showed their agreement. (The lack, in some cases, of skill and professionalism on the part of lawyers and institutional figures also emerged in Focus 1)

5. What do you know about foster care? (Duration: 16 minutes)

This question also brought out divisions in the group.

The majority (3 out of 5) have little knowledge of fostering, based mainly on what they have heard from the mass media or what friends have told them of their experiences. What emerges from this is an idea of fostering as taking care of foreign children who come to Italy, or as a terrible experience that happened to someone they know (without however explaining why the experience was so terrible). One mother wondered moreover how a minor who has been placed in the care of a “healthy” foster family could ever return to their birth family. This perhaps, from her point of view, would involve a comparison between the two situations that could only put the birth family in a bad light, as well as disorienting the minor. In addition, perhaps the return of the minor to their birth family would not be useful, since there are families who, whether out of ignorance or due to real problems (economic, occupational) cannot adequately care for minors.

However, two components of the group (an adoptive mother and former foster mother and the uncle of a boy of whom he is now the “social” i.e. foster parent) intervene to describe their experiences.

They argue that fostering is “highly positive and extremely useful for the good of young people”. In the foster family young people learn a sense of rules, behaviour and getting along together.

However, it also emerges that fostering is not an easy experience, above all because there

is no school that teaches you how to be parents and often families feel lost, unprepared, without support. Moreover, even if such a school existed, it would have to be tailor-made for each individual young person, who has a specific background and personal needs that differ from those of all the other young people.

At this point two things need to be highlighted.

1. The last observation given above, made by one of the two participants with experience of fostering and taken up and confirmed by the other, immediately recalls themes that were extensively discussed in Focus 2: the need for the family to be given training and preparation, the importance of knowing the history of the individual minor, and the provision of constant support to the foster family during the entire period of foster care.
2. The second important point lies in the fact that the adoptive mother who speaks positively of fostering explains that she moved from fostering to so-called “mild adoption”. This is of interest because the mother stresses the importance of this type adoption for *her case*, since it entailed the continuation of the relationship between the birth and foster families, with enormous benefits for both the young people (who wanted to see and talk to their father) and the birth parent who did not have to suffer separation from his children.
3. As stated above, the (birth) mother's concerns regarding the young person's return to their birth family after the period of foster care comes to an end are the fruit of a frankly declared lack of knowledge of the topic. However, they draw attention to the consideration (partly highlighted in Focus 2) that if a recovery programme is to be successfully implemented, it cannot be limited to the minor alone but must also encompass their family context, something which the focuses repeatedly show does not happen or at least not effectively.

**6. Do you think that sending the young people to prison would have achieved better results than their current experience or worse?
(Duration: 6 minutes)**

To this question the whole group gives an unequivocal answer: prison does not improve young people.

A range of arguments are given.

One of the participants (birth uncle, foster parent) says that if the young person placed in his care had been sent to prison he would have suffered a deep loss of self-confidence, believing himself to be what his father said he was: a delinquent. In contrast, this form of support (as he calls fostering) “opens up a window in the young person's heart and allows him to think that perhaps he is different from how his father describes him”. In addition, knowing that his friends are in prison, the young person is grateful to his uncle, since if it wasn't for this other family, perhaps he would have been imprisoned (losing, in the uncle's opinion, a chance to redeem himself in his own eyes).

Other components of the group say that prison increases young people's anger (an aspect that also emerged in Focus 2) and makes them feel truly part of that environment rather than believing that what they have done is more of a youthful mistake.

NB: the foster parent who stated firmly that prison would have only worsened the situation of the young person entrusted to his care (his nephew) added that their region lacked a culture of fostering. "Perhaps because there are no funds, or perhaps because there are no qualified people, even the day centres for minors, where the young people in care spend their time, can be deleterious for them, because they are not adequately followed in a process of education and growth and often the families, already burdened with problems of their own, have to make up for these omissions.

This observation, seconded by all the components of the group, recalls what was stated in Focuses 1 and 2 on the same theme: the lack of a widespread culture of foster care shared by all parties involved that would link them in a network, in addition to the lack of constant support for families.

**7. What then could the authorities and social services do to help the families?
(Duration: 3 minutes)**

According to the participants, while the young person is in their hands (for example in the day centres) the social services should take care of him/her and act as if they were his/her real family.

In addition, they should provide concrete support, with real human beings, simple people who do the job of a parent. The social services could do more; they are slapdash and exhibit failings.

The main point for all participants however is that the family is better suited to the task of bringing up and guiding young people. It is a resource.

NB: The first part of the answer recalls what was pointed out by a mother (birth family) who, in response to the first question of this focus, argued that in the detention centres young people are often treated like "packages" by people who are there just because it's their job and therefore do not take as much care as a parent would.

**8. In situations in which a child of yours commits a crime, however petty or serious, and you recognise that your family is not up to the task of helping the young person to emerge from this difficult phase, would you consent to the young person being placed in the care of another family?
(Duration: 5 minutes)**

All participants answered in the affirmative. One mother (birth family) said that she would have to be introduced to the foster family first.

In addition, they all say once more that in such a situation, the family is better than prison

and fostering is definitely a positive choice, since only in a family can a person learn to live with others, build relationships with others and learn rules of behaviour and respect. Indeed, while in a detention centre, there are rigid rules to be adhered to, in a family they learn that those rules are not just sterile impositions but ways in which to learn respect for others.

However, in order for fostering to be a resource, it has to be part of the culture and there has to be a form of training that goes beyond mere provision of information, but is rather a broader process that helps people to open up to others.

Observations

The third focus involved parents from birth and foster families.

The group was not homogeneous. There were differences in terms of both personality and background that induced some to participate more and others to adopt a more muted approach.

Initially the participants seemed reticent, almost embarrassed, but soon after the start of the focus and, especially from the second question onwards, the entire group seemed more relaxed, to the point that often the participants (two in particular) talked at length about their family and personal situation.

The questions highlighted points on which the group was in agreement and others on which opinions differed.

In general, all the participants noted feelings of incapacity and confusion when faced with the unfamiliar situation of their children adopting deviant behaviours.

Initially all the participants showed great respect for the social services and, in general, for all parties involved in foster care. The social services in particular were seen as an indispensable element of this framework, a psychological point of reference for the young person and for the parents.

However, in the course of the focus failings emerged that are often linked to the lack of professionalism and sensitivity of the personnel, delays in acting, lack of interest and coldness, elements that have consequences that the family then has to deal with. In addition, the family is always seen as a resource and a social nucleus that is fundamental for the education and support of young people. It is a place that teaches them how to live and can never be replaced with a youth detention centre, since it is only in the family that they can acquire a sense of rules (not mere commands) and a sense of human relationships and respect.

However, in order for the family to function at its best and in order for the practice of fostering to spread and to improve, there has to be adequate training, help and constant support. Fostering is a project that affects not just the minor but also their birth and foster

families.

As already noted in the present summary, there are numerous links with Focus 2, indicating that their reflections are broadly shared.

FOCUS GROUP 4

Participants: 7 young people on probation

Place: social services for minors, Lecce

Duration: 53 minutes

1. What does being in probation mean for you, how has it changed your life, what are the positive and negative aspects?

We agree on the positive side of probation because it changes your life, it helps you to grow and it make you reflect. Although it is a sacrifice, it gives you some rules and it helps you to understand their importance. Only in this way can we accept the rules and keep to them, for example with timetables and training courses. We do not agree though on the places where you should do your probation; for some it's better in a detention centre, precisely because you get more help and you don't have many opportunities to break the rules, while for others the family is always preferable because you have more freedom.

2. Do you think the decision that was taken in your case could or should have been different? Do you think a better decision could have been taken?

We believe that it was the best decision that could have been taken in our interest, especially if you want to change your lifestyle, starting with the realisation of the mistakes you made. Being placed in the care of a family is always preferable if the family context is characterised by harmony, love and trust. Naturally it's better to be in a family, even if there are more temptations.

3. Before being placed in probation, had you been subject to any other court decisions? If so, what kind?

No.

4. Considering your own experience or what you have heard from others, what do you think of foster care? Do you think it is useful for troubled young people?

The positive aspects of fostering are only grasped over time. The usefulness of the foster family lies in its ability to help you, to show you the right road to follow, because they care about your safety and your education. The foster family can understand your needs and fulfil them. For these reasons we wouldn't change anything about the fostering plan. However, the young people show continuing attachment to their birth family, saying: "they are still your parents".

5. Would you agree to live in a foster family where there are rules and restrictions, for example at the weekend, for a certain period?

For some the foster family is a resource in terms of both the opportunities for positive growth it provides and the greater freedom they enjoy. Others prefer to be placed in a youth detention centre because they fear losing the relationship with their birth family.

6. What type of support do you think you need now? To what extent can this be provided by educators, friends and families? What do you need?

Adults help you understand your mistakes, although in this phase we need jobs more than services. The dialogue with educators is important but often we feel that we are not being listened to and above all that we are not believed. We need parental affection.

7. Our project (Daphne III) is part of the European Union's plans to create a "child-friendly justice". In your opinion, how can the courts and the entire juvenile justice system become closer to young people?

It is difficult to imagine that the law can be the friend of those who commit crimes. They could be a bit more lenient, they could be faster, and they could keep us informed of the various stages.

8. Have you ever heard of "mild adoption"?

Never.

OBSERVER'S CONSIDERATIONS

The young participants in the meeting showed a good capacity for reflection. Two of them made no contribution. The focus began in an atmosphere of general embarrassment, with the exception of one minor who spoke with great candour from the beginning. In their first answers they showed a certain understanding of the decisions taken, because they feel the need for rules. Only subsequently did they express their opposition, mixed with feelings of anger and resentment. Indeed, in the last few answers, although they were clearly tiring of the focus, the young people expressed a need for the affection that only the family can provide. There was no sign of resistance towards foster care plans; their perplexity was rather the result of their limited knowledge of the practice.