

Empowerment-Based Foster Care Service Model: A Transformative Approach in the Context of the Year of the Family

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Abstract

This study aims to evaluate the foster care service model from the perspective of the empowerment approach, with the objective of strengthening family-based service models within the child protection system in line with the declaration of 2025 as the “Year of the Family”, the Twelfth Development Plan, and the 2024–2028 Vision Document for the Protection and Strengthening of the Family. The scope of the research includes 38 peer-reviewed publications published between 2000 and 2024, identified through searches of the Web of Science, Scopus, and ULAKBİM databases using the keywords “foster care” and “empowerment approach”, all of which were accessible in full text. The study employed Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis procedures. The themes identified demonstrated that the empowerment approach fulfils multilayered functions extending beyond economic support to encompass psychosocial, educational, and institutional dimensions. The findings indicate that the systematic integration of strategies such as legal regulations, resource allocation, family training modules, decision-making workshops, and the strengthening of social networks would enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of foster care services. The conceptual framework presented is expected to fill a gap in the literature and contribute significantly to both academic discussions and policy recommendations specific to Türkiye. In addition, these analyses provide opportunities for identifying new directions for field-specific research.

Keywords: Foster care service model, Empowerment approach, 2025 year of the Family, Social policy, Türkiye.

1. INTRODUCTION

The family is a fundamental institutional structure that both meets individuals’ physical, psychological, and social needs and plays a key role in ensuring social continuity. Ünal (2015) defines the family as the first social environment in which individuals are born and raised; while Kır (2011) and Danış and Sütlü (2016) emphasize that the family institution creates solidarity networks that foster a sense of belonging and social adaptation. According to Giddens (1997), the family is a kinship-based community comprising adults who assume caregiving responsibilities and children to whom these responsibilities are transferred; whereas Önal (1990) views the family as the primary social unit that facilitates intergenerational value transmission and socialization.

The concept of childhood has evolved over time and has come to be recognized as a distinct stage of development. Postman (1995) notes that in medieval Europe, children were regarded

as miniature adults; the modern understanding of childhood emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries under the influence of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. This paradigm shift extended the responsibility for child protection beyond the confines of the family, leading to the enactment of the first protective laws by the state in the 19th century; in the 20th century, it laid the groundwork for active societal participation within the framework of the welfare state principle (Karataş, 2001; Yolcuoğlu, 2009). In Türkiye, Law No. 5395 on Child Protection defines children in need of protection as individuals whose “physical, mental, moral, social, and emotional development, as well as personal safety, are at risk,” prioritizing family-based models over institutional care (İzci, 2020).

The foster care service model is a central practice aimed at providing care for children in need of protection within a safe and loving family environment outside their biological family setting (Erdal, 2014; Kaymakçı, 2021). The number of studies conducted under the title “foster family care” internationally has increased significantly during the 2019–2023 period; bibliometric analyses indicate that 2020 was the most productive year for publications in this field, with the United States being the country that produced the most studies (Dölek et al., 2024). However, studies that comprehensively examine the theoretical foundations of the foster care model—particularly from the perspectives of systems theory, attachment theory, the ecological approach, and social capital theory—remain limited.

This study aims to examine the national and international literature using a descriptive qualitative review method to determine how the foster care service model is evaluated from the five theoretical perspectives mentioned above. In this way, a robust conceptual framework will be provided to identify theoretical gaps and develop policy and practice recommendations focused on empowerment.

1.a Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The overall purpose of this study is to examine the historical development and current practices of the foster care service model and, within a conceptual framework, assess how the integration of an empowerment approach into this model can contribute to service quality and sustainability. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To systematically identify the evolutionary stages and current examples of the foster care service model in national and international literature spanning the 2000–2025 period;
2. To identify the fundamental functions and limitations of four theoretical perspectives—system theory, attachment theory, the ecological approach, and social capital theory—when evaluating the model;
3. To identify existing gaps in the integration of the empowerment approach into the foster care model and develop concrete recommendations across educational, economic, and social responsibility dimensions;
4. To discuss the potential of the conceptual framework developed to contribute both to theoretical literature and to policy and practice recommendations specific to Türkiye.

In line with these objectives, the next section, titled “Theoretical Framework,” will provide a detailed examination of the model’s historical development, implementation methods, and legal

regulations, followed by a comprehensive assessment of how the empowerment approach can improve service quality.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Method

This study was conducted using a descriptive literature review design with the aim of conceptually re-evaluating the foster care service model from the perspective of a strengthening approach (Webster and Watson, 2002). The literature review involves the systematic collection, selection, and analysis of both national and international academic studies.

2.2. Data Analysis

The studies obtained from the literature review were analyzed according to the thematic analysis steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Accordingly, the foster care model was historically established as a service model. The approaches to the foster care model that have persisted to the present day formed the subthemes of the study. Each theme was interpreted in terms of both its theoretical and practical dimensions, presenting a comprehensive framework.

2.3. Limitations of the Study

Since the study was based solely on published academic sources and access to internal reports and field studies was not available, the scope of the case studies remains limited. Additionally, because some historical information was obtained from secondary sources, there is a lack of firsthand verification.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

Since the research consists solely of published and publicly available texts, approval from an ethics committee is not required.

3. FINDINGS

3.1. The Historical Development and Current Practices of the Foster Care Service Model

The earliest examples of foster care emerged in 17th-century England under the Poor Law, which placed children unable to live in their own homes with other families; in the 19th century, it emerged in the United States when Reverend Brace placed homeless children on farms to protect them from the dangers of large cities, providing them with shelter and work opportunities (Uluç, 1997; cited in Doğan, 2013).

The 20th century was a period in which the concept of childhood and children's rights were addressed in a more comprehensive manner; the developments that took place during this process laid the groundwork for the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention safeguards the child's right to life, development, and protection, and emphasizes that the family is the fundamental institution for the realization of these rights. Article 5 of the Convention asserts that parents bear responsibility for the child, that the child should be supported within their own family, and that the state must support this process (Yolcuoğlu, 2009).

When the historical process is examined, it is observed that foster care services have been shaped in line with social conditions. In the Ottoman Empire, especially after the Tanzimat

reforms, institutionalization in care services for orphaned and abandoned children accelerated; during the Republican era, a transition occurred from volunteer-based practices to institutional dormitory-style care models; today, however, a family-based service approach has once again come to the forefront.

In Türkiye, the General Directorate of Child Services operating under the Ministry of Family and Social Services (ASHB) implements policies based on the principle that every child should primarily grow up in a family environment. While Social and Economic Support (SES) is provided for children experiencing hardship due to economic reasons, foster care or adoption services are utilized in cases where living with the biological family is deemed inappropriate; institutional care is considered a last resort.

Foster care refers to the placement of children who cannot live with their biological families under the supervision of the state, in accordance with Law No. 5395, with a qualified family for either short- or long-term care. The primary aim of this model is to ensure that children in need of protection have their physical, emotional, and social needs met within a healthy family environment (Karataş, 2007; Yazıcı, 2014; Erdal, 2014). Reasons for placing children under protection include neglect, abuse, involvement in crime, substance abuse, loss of a parent, or the inability of parents to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities. In the Turkish legal system, the care of a child is first sought to be provided within the biological family; if this is not possible, alternative models such as foster care or institutional care are considered (Tezel et al., 2018). In Türkiye, foster care services are carried out through the following four basic models (General Directorate of Child Services, 2024):

- Relative or close-circle foster care model: Care provided by individuals the child knows, such as relatives or members of their social circle.
- • Temporary foster care model: Care provided for children with urgent protection needs, typically for a period not exceeding one month.
- • Long-term foster care model: The most common model in our country, applied in situations where the child's return to their own family is not possible in the short term.
- • Specialized foster care model: Services provided by individuals who have received specialized training to care for children with special needs.

In developed countries, within the scope of child welfare policies, family-based services are prioritized over institutional care; foster care stands out as an important mechanism that contributes to the psychosocial development of children by enabling them to grow up in a family environment where they are loved, valued, and able to develop a sense of belonging (Ünal, 2015; İzci, 2020). Nadile (1987) states that this service has three primary functions: care, protection, and treatment (as cited in Doğan, 2013). Research indicates that children raised in foster care demonstrate more positive outcomes in terms of cognitive development, psychological adjustment, and social functioning compared to children under institutional care (Goldfarb, 1944). Furthermore, while no significant difference has been found in terms of problem behaviors between children raised by their biological families and those raised in foster families, such behaviors have been observed more frequently among children raised in institutional care settings (Üstüner et al., 2005).

3.2. The Core Functions of Foster Care Practices

In this section, the core functions of foster care practices will be examined within the framework of theoretical approaches to the model. These approaches are categorized into five: the ecological approach, systems theory, attachment theory, social capital theory, and the empowerment approach. In this section, only four will be addressed; the empowerment approach will be discussed in depth in the next section in line with the study's objective, and recommendations will be presented regarding dimensions such as education, economic support, and social responsibility.

3.2.a. The Ecological Approach and Foster Care

The ecological approach is rooted in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and views an individual's development within the context of intertwined environmental systems. According to this theory, the child's interactions at the microsystem level (family, peers, school), mesosystem level (relationships between microsystems), exosystem level (indirect influences such as parental employment status, extended family, and social policy), and macrosystem level (cultural values, laws, economic conditions) collectively shape their development in a holistic manner. Foster care services are situated precisely at the intersection of these multi-layered environmental factors.

A child's adjustment and well-being within a foster family are influenced not only by relationships within the family, but also by external factors such as the neighbourhood environment, the school setting, and the infrastructure of health and social services. For example, the amount of financial support provided to the foster family or the social support received from the immediate community (such as help from relatives or neighbours) are key determinants at the exosystem level. Similarly, at the macrosystem level, society's perception of the concept of foster care and cultural attitudes can influence both the foster families' experiences and the children's adjustment. Research conducted in Türkiye indicates that support from the extended family and neighbours during the foster care process facilitates the child's adjustment (Yıldırım alp and Hız, 2018). This highlights the positive influence of the child's social networks, in line with the ecological perspective.

An ecological approach requires foster care interventions to be multifaceted. It is important to take into account not only the child and the foster parent, but also the child's school, peer relationships and, where necessary, contact with the biological family. The literature indicates that interventions such as school-based support programmes and peer mentoring contribute to the educational and social skills of children in foster care (Gilligan, 2007). Similarly, establishing neighbourhood-level support groups for foster families can help families cope with the challenges they face (Certel, 2019). In Certel's (2019) study with families who are members of foster care associations, it was found that participating in support networks increased families' access to information, experience and sharing regarding child care. Consequently, when developing policies for a successful foster care system, a holistic and ecological assessment must be carried out (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Tezel et al., 2018).

3.2.b. Systems theory and foster care

The foster care model can be viewed as part of a broader child protection system. General systems theory emphasises that individuals and families are in constant interaction with the broader social systems in which they are embedded (von Bertalanffy, 1968). In the field of child protection, the systems approach requires that the child be viewed not merely as an individual case, but as part of a whole encompassing the family, society and policy levels. A UNICEF report prepared by Wulczyn et al. (2010) aims to establish a comprehensive protection network involving all stakeholders (the child, the biological family, the foster family, social workers, the legal system, etc.), rather than focusing separately on individual issues such as street children, child labour or abuse.

The child protection system in Türkiye has developed through legal and institutional reforms since the 1980s. The 1983 Social Services Act (SHK, No. 2828) provided a legal framework for foster care; the system was further strengthened by the Child Protection Act enacted in 2005 and the Foster Care Regulation published in 2012. In his study evaluating the child protection system and foster care practices in Türkiye, Karataş (2007) notes that, particularly from the SHÇEK period onwards, foster care has gained importance as an alternative to institutional care, yet certain problems persist in practice. These challenges include inadequate monitoring mechanisms, a lack of cooperation between different institutions, and issues regarding public awareness (Karataş, 2007). Indeed, a recent study based on expert opinions has also revealed that foster care services are still not sufficiently recognised by society (Erbay and Çalış, 2021). This situation indicates a lack of information and coordination at the systemic level.

Conversely, positive steps have been taken in recent years within the framework of a systems approach. For example, provincial-level foster care units have been established across Türkiye with the aim of providing more effective monitoring and support at the local level (Yazıcı, 2014). Furthermore, incentive policies and training programmes aimed at increasing the number of foster families have been introduced (Erdal, 2014). From a systems theory perspective, the foster care model is viewed as an interactive network involving the child, the biological family, the foster family and state institutions. For this network to function effectively, elements such as legal regulations, inter-agency cooperation, social awareness and resource allocation must operate in harmony (Yolcuoğlu, 2011; Wulczyn et al., 2010). Consequently, the success of foster care services depends on addressing all components within the system through a holistic approach.

3.2.c. Attachment theory and foster care

Attachment theory is a developmental theory based on the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, which examines the lifelong effects of the emotional bond a child forms with a caregiver during early childhood. Bowlby (1969) emphasises that children have a need for constant access to a secure attachment figure, and that failure to meet this need may lead to emotional and behavioural problems later in life. This theory provides a critical framework for foster care practice. This is because the majority of children placed in foster care have experienced traumatic separations, such as neglect, abuse or the loss of a parent. From the perspective of attachment theory, one of the primary objectives of the foster family should be to provide the child with a secure secondary attachment figure (Küçükali and Savaş, 2023).

Recent literature reviews indicate that the foster care experience can influence children's attachment styles. An analysis by Küçükali and Savaş (2023) examined the long-term attachment outcomes of children who have experienced trauma whilst in foster care. It has been reported that children who are separated from their primary caregiver during early childhood and move between various carers are at increased risk of developing avoidant or ambivalent attachment (Dozier et al., 2002). A study conducted with children aged 6–17 in foster care in Ankara found that behavioural and emotional problems were observed at a higher rate in these children compared to the general population (Üstüner et al., 2005).

Consequently, from an attachment perspective, the key critical aspect of the foster care service model is ensuring continuity and stability. The trusting relationship established between the child and the foster parent can be decisive for both the child's current psychological well-being and their relationships in adulthood. Therefore, policymakers should focus on preventing frequent placement changes, training foster families in trauma and attachment, and providing as much continuity as possible for every child (Patterson et al., 2018; Yıldırım alp and Hız, 2018; Küçükali and Savaş, 2023).

3.2.d. The social capital approach and foster care

Social capital theory is a perspective that examines the impact of the resources provided by individuals' social networks, sense of trust and shared norms on economic and social outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). According to Kaymakçı (2021), foster families have the potential to offer children richer social networks compared to institutional care. A child raised in a family environment becomes part of a broad social network by interacting not only with their foster parents but also with their relatives, friends and neighbours. This situation can increase the social capital the child can utilise in their future life. On the other hand, children in institutional care often grow up in an environment isolated from society, leading them to form weak ties with the community and face disadvantages in accumulating social capital. Indeed, the difficulties faced by young people leaving institutional care in terms of social integration and employment can be interpreted as an indication of a lack of social capital (Şahin, 2019).

On the other hand, social capital itself is a factor influencing the success of foster care services. For example, the presence of strong civil society organisations and networks between families plays a role in encouraging more families to become foster carers. In Türkiye, foster care associations are an important source of social capital in this regard. Through these associations, families provide each other with both emotional support and the sharing of experiences (Certel, 2019). In this way, the sense of trust and commitment necessary for the sustainability of the foster care model is strengthened.

Özbesler (2009) examined the assessment process in foster care services and emphasised the importance of relationships between the child's biological family, the foster family and the social services system. The successful functioning of this assessment process relies on the establishment of trust and cooperation between the parties – that is, the elements of social capital. Putnam (2000) speaks of 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital at the societal level. The foster care model acts as a bridge between the child in need of protection and society,

thereby strengthening the child's ties to society, whilst also fostering a network of solidarity within the foster care community, thereby developing bonding capital between families.

3.3. The Empowerment Approach in Social Work: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Recommendations

The empowerment approach, within a rights-based perspective of social work, is founded on the principle that individuals and families should gain control over their own lives, actively participate in decision-making processes, and be able to utilise their own resources (Lee, 2001). Since the 1960s, the literature has defined empowerment as moving away from the position of a passive recipient of aid, instead viewing the individual as a subject possessing potential and coping skills (Tuncay and Tekin, 2021). Within this framework, empowerment encompasses the processes of constructively transforming negative emotions during times of crisis, increasing self-efficacy, and mobilising social support systems (Pak, 2020).

Casey Family Programs, based in the US, aims to strengthen the self-confidence and sense of belonging of young people aged 11–18 in care by involving them in all stages of care planning. Research indicates that such participatory approaches enhance young people's decision-making skills and their sense of self-efficacy in planning for the future (Massinga and Pecora, 2004; Stukes, Chipungu and Bent Goodley, 2004). Similarly, the 'Voice of the Child' initiative in the UK has ensured that children and young people in care have a direct say in policy and practice processes.

In Türkiye, the Ministry of Family and Social Services' 2019 foster family training programmes include modules aimed at enhancing parenting skills and psychosocial resilience. The training programmes within this framework are as follows:

1. Basic Foster Care Training

An introduction to the foster care system, legal procedures and essential skills.

Communication with children, the effects of trauma and attachment processes.

2. Developmental Support Modules

The developmental needs of children in different age groups.

Positive discipline methods and behaviour management.

3. Psychosocial Resilience and Crisis Intervention Training

Stress management and coping with burnout.

Approaches to children who have experienced traumatic events.

4. Advanced Foster Care Training

Children with special needs (disabled individuals, chronic illnesses).

Psychological first aid in crisis situations.

These programmes are implemented through the Ministry's 'Foster Care Regulations' and Social Services Centres. Training sessions can be supported by both face-to-face and online modules.

Decision-making workshops piloted by the İzmir Provincial Directorate in 2024 have concretely enhanced young people's participation in care processes. Furthermore, empowerment interventions targeting biological families support children's chances of returning to a permanent family environment (Wulczyn et al., 2010).

At the micro level, empowerment-based training sessions can be organised for foster care specialists and family members by integrating the ‘Year of the Family’ module into the ‘Family Schools’ programme. At the mezzo level, ‘Decision-Making Workshops’ and ‘Youth Empowerment Meetings’ should be launched for young people in foster care; this will help to reinforce their sense of self-efficacy and participation. At the macro level, annual “Empowerment in Foster Care Symposia” could be organised in provincial governorates to establish a common language among policymakers, practitioners and academics. Furthermore, economic, legal and psychosocial counselling services should be strengthened through the “Mum Support Helpline” and online platforms.

The systematic integration of a strengthening approach into the foster care service model enhances the effectiveness of services by mobilising the internal resources of both children and families, and facilitates the widespread adoption of participant-centred practices. The micro-, mezzo- and macro-level steps proposed within the framework of the Year of the Family provide a robust roadmap that will enable both learning from international examples and the strengthening of policies specific to Türkiye.

4. CONCLUSION

This literature review has demonstrated that each of the perspectives—empowerment, systems, attachment, ecological and social capital—sheds light on a different dimension of the foster care service model. The empowerment approach has demonstrated how increasing the participation of the child and the foster family in decision-making processes and enhancing their sense of self-efficacy improves service effectiveness; whilst systems theory has highlighted that a lack of coordination among stakeholders limits service quality. Attachment theory emphasised that the continuity of placements and trusting relationships play a critical role in the child’s psychological recovery; the ecological approach highlighted the influence of social environment and policy factors beyond the child’s family dynamics. The social capital theory, meanwhile, demonstrated how strong social networks sustain the foster care system and foster social well-being.

Going beyond the limited number of studies focusing on the empowerment approach, this review has provided an interdisciplinary synthesis by bringing together five key theoretical perspectives. It guides practitioners by offering a concrete roadmap for the design of family education modules at the micro level, decision-making workshops at the mezzo level, and county-wide empowerment symposia at the macro level.

Including the ‘Empowerment Toolkit’ module in foster family education programmes will support not only parenting skills but also the active participation of children in decision-making processes. To facilitate inter-agency coordination, the transfer of foster family placement and monitoring processes to the e-government platform will both reduce bureaucratic barriers and, from a systems theory perspective, strengthen cooperation among relevant actors. Furthermore, the allocation of resources to local foster care associations and the expansion of mentor-mentee programmes will directly strengthen social networks, as indicated by social capital theory, thereby enhancing the well-being of both families and children.

Areas on which future research should focus include: measuring the effectiveness of empowerment-based interventions on foster care professionals and children using quantitative methods; longitudinal studies tracking the psychosocial outcomes of placement continuity—as emphasised by attachment theory—over a period of three to five years; and feasibility and impact analyses of empowerment strategies implemented via mobile applications or online platforms within an ecological framework.

In light of these findings and recommendations, a strengthening-focused redesign of the foster care service model will provide a foundation that will both contribute to the theoretical literature and support policy reforms specific to Türkiye.

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