

## University of Groningen

### A story of stories

Wubs, Susanna Dorothea

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Wubs, S. D. (2018). *A story of stories: The impact of caring for a foster child with a history of sexual abuse on family life*. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

**Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

**Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

# CHAPTER 1

---

**Introduction**

Although sexual abuse is a horror not linked to any time period, it has gained a lot of attention in the media, science, and policy in the past years. The most recent wave of attention to the topic is the #metoo movement in which many persons, mostly adult women, have proclaimed their own victimization of sexual assault or abuse. The amount of tweets, Facebook and Instagram posts marked with #metoo are alarming. However, we must realize the #metoo population is more rampant than appears from the digital platforms, as many sexual abuse victims are too young to (pro)claim their victimization. Some are not able to grasp the reality of what has happened to them. The numbers of child victims of sexual abuse are disturbingly high. The National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings (2014) estimates that in the Netherlands one in three children suffer a form of sexual violence during childhood. Most of these children are abused by a family member, a friend, or an acquaintance (National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against children, 2016). A broad definition of child sexual abuse is used in this assessment of the Dutch context, meaning both hands-on and hands-off sexual acts are considered sexually abusive.

In this dissertation a similar broad definition applies: *“the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent, or that violate the social taboos of family roles”* (Kempe, 1977, p. 382). When children are suspected to have been abused by family, often they are placed in out-of-home-care such as a foster family. In 2017, 23.206 children reside in foster care in the Netherlands (Pleegzorg Nederland, 2018).

Prevalence percentages of sexual abuse victims in foster care vary, internationally and nationally, and depend on the applied research method, the usage of a small or broad definition of sexual abuse, and the source of information. Still, many victims of sexual abuse are identified among children growing up in foster care (Euser, Alink, Tharner, IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2013; Grietens, Oijen & Ter Huizen, 2012; Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld tegen Kinderen, 2018; Strijker & Knorth, 2009). Additionally, many studies report how the abuse history of a child is not always known prior to placement and how foster families discover a child’s troubled past over time. For instance, in a Dutch study by Grietens, Van Oijen and Ter Huizen (2012) foster parents suspected that approximately 40% of their foster children had suffered sexual abuse in their past, however, in only seven cases sexual abuse had been substantiated.

In 2012, a small explorative study was conducted by Grietens et al., which centered foster parents of children who had been sexually abused prior to placement in foster care. In this study, commissioned by the governmental Samson Committee, several foster parents narrated

the great impact of fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse on their family, as well as on the fostering process. Many foster parents voiced their ongoing need of support in this fostering experience. More importantly, in-depth research appeared to be essential to learn more about the experiences of Dutch families fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. As a result, in 2013 the Iris Project was developed.

## The Iris Project

The Iris Project, referring to the Greek messenger of the gods “Iris”, is a narrative study on the expertise, needs, and experiences of families who foster a child with a putative history of sexual abuse prior to placement in foster care. The main goal of this qualitative study is to gain insight into the impact of a history of sexual abuse on the individuals of the family, and on the family as a unit. Therefore, foster parents, their biological children, and their foster children have been invited to participate in the study. As a result of two recruitment phases, 31 members of 11 families participated in this study. This sample consisted of 11 foster mothers, six foster fathers, 12 biological children, and two foster children. Over a timespan of two years we collected the stories of the adult participants by means of episodic interviews. In these interviews we firstly focused on a person’s life story, after which we explored the participants’ narratives on everyday life matters, as well as themes derived from literature and more general matters. The children who participated were either interviewed or completed a personal activity book containing several creative non-verbal tasks. Alongside this narrative study, several smaller studies (for example, studies on signs of sexual abuse or the available foster parent education on child sexual abuse) have been conducted to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse on foster family life. On one of them, a case file study on processes of self-disclosure by foster children, we report in chapter four. Chapters five and six present some of the results of the Iris Project. Chapter three reports on the researchers’ reflections on the process of collecting narrative data.

## The main objective of this dissertation

This dissertation centers narratives on the impact of fostering a victim of sexual abuse and the manners in which this impact is manifested in everyday fostering family life. In addition, the impact of studying this sensitive topic in a family context is reviewed.

## Outline of the dissertation

After this introductory chapter and a short presentation of the theoretical and methodological framework in chapter two, chapter three concerns a detailed reflection on the process of collecting narratives within the Iris Project. Chapters four, five, and six provide empirical studies on several aspects of fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. In chapter seven, overall theoretical and methodological conclusions are discussed. In more detail the chapters' contents read as follows:

### **Chapter two**

Chapter two provides a theoretical and methodological framework containing insights from literature into the consequences of child sexual abuse and fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. Furthermore, an impression of the narrative approach is presented.

### **Chapter three**

The study presented in chapter three is an in-depth reflection on the fieldwork in Project Iris. In the process of collecting narratives in the participating families, the research team faced several methodological, ethical, and emotional challenges. The researchers resolved these matters by being attuned to the individual participants, to the familial context, as well as to themselves as researchers. Excerpts of the researchers' logs on critical moments during the field work illustrate the use of meta-level sensitivity as a tool. This chapter is included in this dissertation as insights into the researchers' contributions to the Iris Project add to a deeper overall understanding why the Iris Project became what it has become.

### **Chapter four**

The fourth chapter consists of a case file study on foster children's informal self-disclosures of previously unknown histories of sexual abuse. Insights are provided in the complex process of child sexual abuse disclosure in the context of foster care.

### **Chapter five**

The study covered in chapter five aims at a deeper understanding of the concept of safety in families who foster a child with a history of sexual abuse. The narratives of 14 foster parents and 12 birth children were reviewed individually as well as in relation to each other. The dynamics of safety in foster families are explored from a systemic perspective.

**Chapter six**

Chapter six reports on women who foster a child, who was victim of maternal sexual abuse. The life stories of four foster mothers of victims of maternal sexual abuse are studied more in-depth and reveal that women who foster these children may have a paradoxical position in the child-rearing process.

**Chapter seven**

In the final chapter of this dissertation, the main findings are related to relevant literature. In addition, we discuss some of the strengths and limitations of the studies, as well as implications for research and practice.



with no man  
can lay down  
his, if ye do  
demand you.