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### A story of stories

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# CHAPTER 5

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## **Stories on safety**

This chapter is based on : Wubs, D., Batstra, L., & Grietens, H. (2018).

The rippling effects of unsafety in foster families - A narrative study.

(submitted)

## Abstract

A number of safety issues arise when fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse. This qualitative study examined narratives on (un)safety from multiple members of eight foster families. The narratives from 14 foster parents and 12 birth children were coded inductively, after which the data were reviewed from a bird-eye view. Two social positions dominate unsafe experiences. The first is that of being a threat, the second is that of being a protector. Foster families highlighted the relational aspects of (un)safety, as unsafety in any relationship has consequences for the other members of the family. This study strengthens the view on unsafety as a social construct as families move between and beyond risk and safety.

*Keywords:* Child sexual abuse, foster care, foster families, narrative research, qualitative research, unsafety

## Introduction

Safety is a dynamic concept and is mostly defined as the absence of danger, or being out of harm's way. Still, especially for children who were sexually abused by their caregivers, a difference may exist between being physically safe and feeling safe. For example, foster children, who have suffered abuse prior to placement in foster care, learn who is safe for them and who is not, and, therefore, often develop an insecure attachment style (Cairns, 2002). More specifically, a disorganized attachment is observed in children who have been sexually abused, as they 'can find no strategy that enables them either to feel safe or regulate their emotionally hyperaroused states' (Howe & Fearnly, 2003, p. 373). Finkelhor and Browne (1985) noted that sexual abuse alters children's views of themselves, people, and the world. Especially when abused by a family member, children are betrayed in their trust, as they learn that someone on whom they depended knowingly hurt them. In addition, children are severely disempowered as their personal boundaries are invaded forcefully. As a child's perception of the world is strongly influenced by having suffered sexual abuse, help is needed from trustworthy people in restoring this (Janoff-Bulmann, 1992). However, as McFadden (1989) concluded, a child's previous experiences with sexual abuse colors its perception of a foster family being trustworthy too.

Fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse raises some safety issues for a foster family too, as some children show complex behavior, for example, sexualized behavior (Dubner & Motta, 1999; Hardwick, 2005; Greeson et al., 2011; Tarren-Sweeney, 2008). Sexualized behavior, like excessive public masturbation, inappropriate touching of others, or sexual advances, is often reported to be source of concern for foster parents. First, these behaviors can cause "uneasy feelings in foster carers and evoke unresolved issues about their own experiences and sexuality" (Hardwick, 2005, p. 34). Second, foster parents report concerns of a foster child's sexualized behavior damaging their birth children. For instance, in the study by Macaskill (1991), foster parents observed how the negative focus on sex destroyed their birth child's sexual innocence. In addition, a foster child's sexual behavior directed towards other children in the family caused "nagging thoughts about the likelihood of these incidents escalating into more serious sexual episodes" (p. 86). Lastly, several studies highlight the fear and impact of sexual abuse allegations against foster family members (Bichal, Cusworth, Wade & Clarke, 2014; Farmer, Lipscombe & Moyers, 2005; Macaskill, 1991; Minty & Bray, 2001). Foster fathers mostly fear being accused of sexually abusing a foster child, consequently, they often distance themselves in anticipation of this. For example, some foster fathers engage little in intimate, caregiving activities (Gilligan, 2000; Heslop, 2016; Inch, 1999).

Many foster parents of a child with a history of sexual abuse feel the urge to set clear rules and boundaries to create a safe environment for themselves, their birth children, and the children they foster (Hardwick, 2005; McFadden, 1989). Furthermore, foster family members seem less vulnerable when they are adequately forewarned of possible risks when fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse (Macaskill, 1991; Martin, 1993; Younes & Harp, 2007). Therefore, it is essential to include these children fully in the fostering experience, as foster parents feel the need to stop their fostering experience when they feel their birth children's safety is not guaranteed (Thompson, McPherson & Marsland, 2016).

As safety is a relational and systemic concept, one person's feelings of unsafety impact others in the same system, for example a family system. Therefore, safety is as much a concern for each fostering individual, as it is for a family as a unit. Each individual's experience of unsafety, however, is unique, as these feelings develop under certain circumstances, within a certain context, and they are influenced by a person's history. In this study, therefore, we aim to explore the dynamics of safety in families who foster a child with a history of sexual abuse from a systemic perspective. The central question of our narrative study is: How do families fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse experience and establish safety for all family members?

## Method

### **Selection**

This study is part of a larger study on the experiences, needs and expertise of families who foster a child with a putative history of sexual abuse. We conducted this larger study in the northern division of a nationwide foster care organization in the Netherlands. All foster care workers in this division were asked to review their past and present caseload and identify suspected and substantiated cases of sexual abuse in foster children, previous to placement in the current foster family. These foster children were considered the leading index children. Two families on this list were selected by the agency to participate in a pilot of the study. When this pilot was successfully finished, we set on to recruit other foster families. Initially, 12 information packages were sent, however, we received little response. Only three families agreed to participate. The declining families declared that they had no time left to invest, whereas others did not want to relive memories regarding the topic of the study.

In a second wave we chose to also recruit foster families where the foster child was excluded from participation, for example, due to age or legal guardianship. Of the eight families we approached, six consented to participation. Only those family members that had knowledge of

the index child's abuse history could participate. Our recruitment process resulted in a sample of 31 members from 11 families. In eight families we collected the narratives of multiple family members. In this paper, we focus on the experience of these eight families, as we set out to study the experiences of different family members. In four families we spoke both foster parents, and their birth child(ren). In two families only the foster mother participated, in addition to some of her birth children. Lastly, in two families only the foster parent couple participated.

### **Data collection**

The narratives of the foster parents and the adult biological children were collected through multiple consecutive in-depth interviews following an episodic structure (Flick, 1997, 2009). We interviewed all adults two to four times, with one exception, depending on their available time and their need to deepen their story. In the first interview we introduced the interview goals and principles, followed by an open exploration of the narrative of the participant starting at the time of the placement of the index child (i.e., the child with a putative history of sexual abuse). The following interviews concerned present daily events as well as more general areas regarding fostering the index child.

In addition, to collect the narratives of the minor children, we created a booklet containing non-verbal narrative eliciting activities. After each interview the interviewer wrote a log containing field notes, observations, emotions, and reflections. This log was used to prepare the consecutive interviews and later it was used in the data analysis.

### **Analysis**

In the larger study, we aimed to understand the impact of a history of sexual abuse on everyday life. Therefore, we first reviewed this topic from the perspective of the individual family members. As each family member develops an individual narrative, including stories on safety and unsafety, an inductive analysis was chosen (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Our study finds roots in constructivism, as we view each person's narrative a construction of a subjective and dynamic reality. With our participants we co-constructed a reality through story-telling. The topic safety was not an explicit part of the questions in our interview protocol, however, in certain questions safety was an underlying concept. Still, many family members spoke of unsafe experiences at their own accord and it seemed a key theme in the fostering experience of many of them. To create the family narratives, we compared and contrasted the personal narratives of family members.

**Coding individual narratives.** All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim taking nonverbal behavior into account as well. Descriptions of critical occurrences during the

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interview were added in the transcript, for instance, emotional moments for the participant or interviewer. For each participant an NVivo10 project (QSR International, 2015) was created containing transcripts and interview logs. We considered the multiple interviews of a participant as their personal narrative.

Using the NVivo software, the involved interviewer conducted an inductive thematic analysis per participant. This process started with reading and re-reading the transcripts, followed by inductive, open coding of the interviews. The analyst made notes regarding possible patterns during this iterative process. These notes became the starting point of the creation of clusters of open codes referring to similar themes. Subsequently, the analyst discussed the coding process with another team member. Differences in interpretation between both researchers were resolved by seeking consensus and the analyst wrote a synthesis of the story of a participant, which was based on the clusters of open codes. This synthesis was presented to the participant as a means of member check. After the analysis on the level of individuals, we reviewed the syntheses of the members of the same family together.

**A bird-eye view on foster families.** Inspired by Ribbens Mccarthy, Holland and Gillies (2003), we approached each family as a case study, following three steps to create a family narrative. First, we reviewed the syntheses of the different family members and determined how far the different individuals were concerned with similar and different themes. We also looked at the linguistic and structural components of the narratives, for example, similarities in word choice. Second, we interpreted similarities, gaps, or contradictions by going back to the original transcripts. Since differences in the interpretation of experiences can be rooted in one's social position within a family (Sands & Roer-Strier, 2006), our final step was to review position-specific themes, which are stories explicitly told from a certain position within a family, for example, a male's, a daughter's, or a teenager's position. This process of comparing and contrasting the multiple perspectives of a family was dynamic and iterative, as the three steps were often intertwined. However, to keep the interpretation process transparent, we documented each theme on a family level in a structured worksheet, which also included the clusters from the individual narratives. Therefore, each decision we made was recorded. Additionally, we created a family NVivo10 project (QSR International, 2015).

This comparative process resulted in a family synthesis. We explored the multiple perspectives on themes important to a family unit, which appeared from the family members' and the families' own narratives. Many of these themes centered around safety or unsafety, either for individuals or the family as a unit. To deepen the knowledge of this complex topic, we studied passages of the family narratives referring to the topic as such or those containing linguistic

indicators pointing to (un)safety. Examples of such linguistic indicators are words referring to fear, risk, or protection. Again, the analysts documented which passages were included.

### **The families and their foster children**

The eight families studied provided non-kinship care and differed in terms of fostering experience. Six foster fathers participated, in addition to all of the foster mothers, two minor birth children and 10 birth children of age. All families were having the Dutch nationality and consisted of two parents. Most of these families identified as Christian. Additional birth children and foster children of seven families did not participate in the study.

The family members explicitly referred to their experience with 14 children with a putative history of sexual abuse, the youngest of which was 3 years of age and the oldest 18 at the time of the interviews. Some of these index children did not live in the foster family anymore, whereas others lived in the foster family for a great number of years. As some families have fostered a great number of children, they also reflected on previous fostering experiences.

As to the information on the abuse, most foster children had been abused by a parental figure prior to placement in the families interviewed. Fathers, mothers, partners of mothers, and grandparents were referred to as the abusers. In two cases the abuser remained unknown, and in two other cases there was an unknown number of perpetrators as the children were prostituted for periods of time. Only a few cases of abuse allegations have been substantiated. The reported severity of the abuse ranged from being exposed to sexual stimuli to being forced to have intercourse.

## **Results**

Two social positions seem to dominate unsafe experiences as told by the foster families. The first position is that of being a threat to someone, the second is that of being someone's protector. In some families both positions were narrated, whilst in other families one social position dominated the fostering experience, and the narrative thereof. Firstly, the position of being a threat seems to be related to the gender and seniority of a family member. The experiences of threatening and threatened family members appeared to have consequences for the others. Secondly, the position of being a protector is mostly narrated by foster mothers, who spoke of the need to protect the foster child as well as other (young) family members. In the following sections we will describe the social positions with regard to unsafety, as we illustrate some



patterns in the families' narratives. In addition, we review some counter-examples of these patterns, all of which do not dominate the family narratives.

**Foster family members as a threat**

Five family narratives, all including the perspective of foster father and some the perspective of a birth son, revealed a gender-based experience of unsafety, as some family members perceived the males in the family being a threat to their foster child. For example, some families saw and experienced how a child avoided foster fathers and focused strongly on their foster mothers.

“ *Five family narratives revealed a gender-based experience of unsafety* ”

Many of these families link this to the fathers being senior males. One foster father, for instance, recalls how his foster son would deny him access in the shower: “In the beginning, when he had to shower, I wasn’t allowed to be near him. Being a man.

Meanwhile, my wife was allowed. He just didn’t want me there.” Still, even when a foster father was approached as a threat and the child focused more on the care-giving female, most families review how this would change over time, as one foster father stated: “We have crossed over to a stage where he does not have to be afraid of me anymore.”

Similar to the threatening foster fathers, two teenage sons, having fostered throughout their teenage years, noticed their foster siblings perceived them as threatening. They experienced being actively avoided by some female foster children, as they saw happening to their fathers: “Some children just really did not respond to me or my father.” This experience led them to postpone developing a bond with the foster children. “I have to be honest, I think I kept some emotional distance, because they distanced themselves from me, because I was a boy.” One younger brother of these threatening teenagers also participated, and, interestingly, he did not refer to a similar experience. On the contrary, he explicated not noticing anything abnormal in his interaction with foster children, as he sensitively focused on gaining children’s trust and building a relationship with them.

Overall, the male fostering figures approached being a perceived threat differently. The teenage sons seemed to distance themselves from activities with their foster sibling, and any responsibility in fostering them, as the teenagers positioned themselves as merely “a son of foster parents.” They appeared reluctant to incorporate being a threat in their identity as a foster sibling. The foster parents, however, narrated their focus on developing a safe interaction between the child and foster father, as they expected a foster child’s growth in this area. The adults seemed to acknowledge being a threat to a child more easily. For instance, one foster father spoke of how he explored the threatening nature of his presence actively, by assessing his every move and

the child's response to it: "We have to continuously observe and attribute meaning to signs of unsafety."

Two families' narratives stand out with regard to familial threats to their foster child. Firstly, in contrast to the other four families, in the fifth family, the threat position did not dominate, yet, foster father was thought to be threatening to the foster child. More specifically, this foster father's threatening position was established even prior to placement as the family "was selected because I wasn't the dominant male type." Consequently, this family made the choice of foster father's limited role in intimate care activities. Similar to what occurred in the other families, this foster father noticed how the child grew attached to him, and did not experience being a threat to his foster daughter in later stages of their fostering experiences.

In the second family, the threatening position of foster father was even more complex, as the family members noticed how this position was somewhat 'functional'. That is, several family members referred to a specific foster child's fear of men. One birth child stated: "Previously a man was someone who...who she needed to please or who did things to her." Consequently, all family members observed the child's fear of her foster father. Still, when the child displayed intense anger, which sometimes led her hurting others or herself, foster father seemingly was the only one to "snap her out of it." Foster father reviewed this complex part he played in the child's anger issues, as this girl was thought to have been abused by several men: "It's really complex because on the one hand I know why she listens to me, on the other hand me calming her down was the safest way to do it."

Although mostly males were perceived as threatening, a number of female participants described how their foster child behaved sexually towards them as females, and how they as females triggered children to act sexually. For example, a foster mother and her two teenaged daughters mostly interpreted their foster child's behavior as an exploration of (sexual) safety: "He tries stuff in order to figure out who I am and how I'm different than her (i.e., the perpetrator)." Nonetheless, one birth daughter narrated her struggle to integrate being a threat into her identity of a care-giving foster sibling. She illustrated this with a story of the boy dissociating during toilet training, in which she, as one of his trusted persons, actively helped: "He looked so sad and frightened to me. As if I held a gun to his face. This shattered me, as I felt I was hurting him. He was so scared."

### **Foster family members threatened**

In three families where the males were approached as unsafe persons, the child was perceived to be unsafe to the males too. The central cause of this was inappropriate sexual behavior of the

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child. For example, one foster father was very determined to procure his own safety and that of his sons when the family fostered girls who showed sexualized behavior: “With those girls I remain in the background. I have to explore what the girl is like and what she could mean to me. I mean, when a girl shows sexualized behavior, this automatically has implications for me.” Another example was given by a foster father who narrated his nightmares of finding his foster daughter next to him in the bed instead of his partner. Both foster parents felt threatened by this girl’s behavior: Foster father recalled taking protective measures to ascertain his personal safety, whereas foster mother described their vulnerability as a couple in this fostering experience. Underlying these threats, or anticipation of threats, are the risks of allegations, which are amplified by a child’s sexualized behavior.

Another different type of threat was rooted in a foster child’s sexualized behavior, as this seemed to cause confusion in some teenaged birth children. Suddenly a negative connotation was attached to sexuality. Several siblings (male and female) explicitly linked this struggle to puberty, as one stated: “When you are not really comfortable with your own sexuality, it is really difficult to provide safety for such a girl.” Additionally, one teenager recalled how she felt somewhat threatened by a child’s affectionate behavior, as this nine-year-old boy had sexual experience she did not have. She stated:

*“...when he put his hand on my leg, I thought what are his intentions? You really don’t want to think that, but he experienced really unusual things for a nine-year-old. To me it felt like a random strange bloke, an adult man, put his hand on my leg.”*

In contrast to some of the foster fathers and birth children, foster mothers rarely described the child’s behavior as threatening to them personally. This is interesting as some of these women did narrate similar experiences as their male peers. For example, one foster mother described how her foster son is triggered by her as a woman, and often masturbated as a response to her aiding presence in the shower. However, both foster mother and her partner did not describe this to be threatening to them, whereas the occurrence or even the anticipation of sexualized behavior in other families was often labeled as threatening. Nonetheless, as this boy had a strong reaction to foster mother, she was the person to limit her role in the intimate caregiving of the boy. In contrast to other cases, for this particular foster child, foster father became the main caregiver in intimate situations: “It’s odd, but he doesn’t do it when my husband helps him in the shower. So, since then my husband has helped him to shower.” Interestingly, foster mother’s limited role in caregiving activities with regard to this specific foster child even is out of the ordinary

for this family's normal routine, as both foster parents stated foster father was generally having limited part in caregiving.

Another contrasting example was narrated by one foster mother who is personally threatened by her foster daughter's sexualized behavior. That is, she feels threatened by the child's physical contact: "When she was much smaller, she sat on my lap and we hugged all the time. I never found that unpleasant. But now she is older, I sometimes... I don't know...sometimes she feels threatening to me." This foster mother too noticed how the child was not focused on her husband. Furthermore, she did not relate her experience of unsafety to a risk of allegations; instead she related her feelings to a violation of her personal physical boundaries. More specifically, her narrative is not dominated by the girl's threatening behavior to herself, but by foster mother's felt responsibility to protect the other children in her family from the girl's behavior.

As the families reported foster fathers' experienced or anticipated unsafety, or that of their foster children, most of the care-giving tasks seemed to fall upon the foster mothers. Yet, in some families this task fell upon the other females when the foster mother was not present: foster parents' birth daughters. Interestingly, in several families the birth daughters reported how being involved in these activities out of protection of their male relatives caused unsafe experiences for themselves. This experience seemed rooted in their position of being a female. For example, one teenage birth daughter positioned herself explicitly as a playmate of her foster siblings, as she did not enjoy caregiving activities. However, when her mother was absent, she recalled how her parents asked her to put a foster sibling to bed as her father could not do this: "It felt weird... Usually my dad did things like this, or my mother." Furthermore, a birth daughter in another family remembered how she was shocked by what she experienced: "Every time I gave her a bath, she literally offered herself to me. Seriously, it was really awful! And I didn't want to do that every night." Interestingly, her brother recalled the following: "My parents decided that my oldest sister, and later on my younger sisters as well, could help during bath time or bed time, but we as boys were not helping in this under any circumstance." Caregiving activities as such were perceived risky for the birth sons.

Additionally, other examples did not include a birth daughter's active responsibility of caregiving activities. Nonetheless, they did reflect a birth daughter's role in protecting her threatened male relatives:

*“My husband was never alone with our foster daughter in the car. Even when she lived with us for some time. Because we didn’t want the girl to feel threatened and we wanted to avoid something being said by the child. Of course, sometimes children are abused by their mother, so you can never be certain. But we want to fully avoid misinterpretations. So, the couple of times I couldn’t drive the girl, my daughter went along.”*

The birth daughter, centered in this quote, voiced her opinion as it comes to fostering children with a history of sexual abuse: “I don’t like it when children are abused or need a lot of help, because you have to spend a lot of time on them.” Not all birth daughters seemed to favor their involvement to indirectly protect their male relatives.

Several foster parents reported that besides sharing some caregiving responsibilities with their teenagers, talking about threats, risks or unsafe experiences with their teenagers was beneficial to their fostering experience. For example, one foster mother reviewed how her teenage daughter enjoyed helping her mother out in fostering a boy. However, when this 16-year-old helped their foster child during bath time, she was asked if she would touch his erected penis. She stated:

*“The first time it happened, I went to my parents immediately and told them what had occurred. They took it from there. When it happened later on, I told him myself: This isn’t appropriate. Still, every time it happened me and my parents talked about it.”*

Her mother emphasized that her daughter’s age was crucial to the success of their fostering experience, as this allowed her to talk to them more easily about possible threatening experiences:

*“You have to face so many things, and that starts with showering him, dressing him, physical contact. I think it wouldn’t have worked if our children were young. With older children you can talk about things far more and explain why he behaves the way he does.”*

### **Protecting foster family members**

In three family narratives the protection side of unsafety dominated. Mostly foster mothers felt that protecting a foster child from triggers of sexualized behavior also meant protecting the other children in the family from a confrontation with this behavior. It seemed these three families

have something in common: The index foster child had the same age or was slightly older than some children in the family.

The foster mothers and one foster father of three families highlighted how many things in everyday life were triggers to their foster child. Several examples of triggers were given: objects (for example, furniture, advertisements, and books), activities (for example, witnessing a diaper change, rough play, and sex education), and people (for example, school instructors or people resembling the perpetrator). The foster children were mostly described as being aroused or afraid because of these triggers. One foster father stated: “Just expect the unexpected.” According to him and his partner seemingly trivial things triggered sexual arousal or a disclosure of sexual abuse in their foster child:

*“A few weeks ago he held a kiwi against his cheek and said ‘wow, this is hairy’. Then he started to pant. Seriously, we were completely stunned...aroused by a kiwi. Yes, the memories of the abuse are still very present.”*

The excessive sexual behavior of the foster children was troubling in these three families. For instance, when a birth daughter (in the same age as her foster sibling) once mentioned to her mother that her foster sibling kept panting continuously at night time, foster mother was alerted. “When we realized what this meant, we gave my daughter her own room, because I felt she shouldn’t be confronted with that behavior”, as foster mother referred to the foster child’s excessive masturbating. For the same reason foster parents made sure their foster daughter had her own room or slept in their room during family vacations: “We made sure she was not around the others, because you know, she makes noises like some adult woman four times at night. The kids really shouldn’t be exposed to that.” Because she felt their foster child’s behavior is damaging to others, mostly to the younger children, this foster mother went out of her way to not burden the other family members and she voiced her everyday task to be to “remove all sexual incentives.” Possibly this foster mother was very effective in protecting her children. Her children’s narratives do not reflect any perceived sexual threats or unsafe experiences, even though they were aware of their foster sibling’s history.

In contrast to this story, another foster mother reviewed how a nine-year-old’s excessive masturbation was a method for him to release stress and she reasoned that this and other sexual behavior was caused by his past. However, a clear turning point in her fostering experience was when the boy pulled a small child on his lap and he was found rubbing the child on his genitals, while moaning and panting. After discussing this situation with him, this foster mother learned he had waited until the chaperoning adults left the room for a minute. This changed her view of

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the boy. She felt he made a conscious choice and held some accountability for his behavior, and, because of this, she could no longer guarantee the safety of other young foster children in the family. This incident led to an increased sense of risks in their everyday life. Still, both parents of this family narrated they were confident their 13-year-old birth daughter did not need protection from the boy. Their daughter agreed:

*“Girl: Because he was abused, he thinks it normal to do stuff like that. Sometimes he does those things at school too. So he shouldn’t play with girls, because then that stuff happens.”*

*Interviewer: You are girl too.*

*Girl: He doesn’t act like that around me. Only around girls his age. I’m kind of normal to him.”*

Similarly, the foster mother of a third family reviewed the age being crucial in the degree of protection needed: The older children in this family seemed merely annoyed by their foster child’s sexual comments and behavior, whereas foster mother felt the younger children to be endangered by this. In addition, she explained how she would not feel comfortable in fostering a boy older than her birth daughters: “You want to protect your own children.” Still, she was very conscious in creating an emotionally safe space for her older children by discussing what someone might have seen or heard: “It is important they have an outlet, because to them too it can be very shocking.”

The foster mothers of these three families seemed to act as a human shield between the foster child and other young children in order to prevent harm done to all children. For example, all of them felt the need to monitor the child’s every move. As a consequence of this, they all felt the strain of being in a high state of alertness, especially when this task was not shared with others. For instance, one foster mother explained her husband preferred to not validate the sexual past of a child, in addition, he wanted to prevent any risk the girl posed. He had voiced his feelings of unsafety in the fostering situation. As a result, he stopped contributing to intimate caregiving activities and he distanced himself from his child-rearing role. This led to an isolated position for foster mother: “At some point you are just going through the motions. You stop being yourself at some point. Your only worry is to not let the others suffer from her behavior.”

## Discussion

The narratives of foster families in this study contain accounts of their experiences of unsafety, and two social positions dominated their stories. In our bird-eye review of the family narratives, the relational aspect of unsafety becomes clear.

### Significance of the major findings

Our results indicate that both foster family members and their foster children explore personal safety simultaneously. More specifically, foster families seemingly try to assess the safety of their family system in a fostering experience, whereas a foster child simultaneously tries to figure out if the new people in their life are to be trusted. Building safe relationships seems to be a process, which develops in a wave pattern. New phases in the development of a foster child or in a family system, and anticipation thereof, can be new sources of an individual's feelings of unsafety. Hence, this may impact the relationships built. Similar to literature, foster families narrated facing or anticipating on new challenges in the upcoming phases (Lietz, Julien-Chinn, Geiger & Piel 2016).

Our study, similarly to the study of Backett-Milburn and Harden (2004), strengthens the view of (un)safety as a dynamic, social construct: Families, as a social system, negotiate, create, and recreate risk and safety. More specifically, our results show that one family member's feeling or experience of unsafety has a rippling effect within the family as a unit. For example, firstly, we found that risks in the execution of child-rearing tasks are assessed to be higher for one family member, and in some families these tasks are explicitly transferred, or explicitly not transferred to other relatives. As this transfer can create new unsafe situations to the newly involved relatives, one person's experience of unsafety can also shift to someone else. One unsafe experience is solved, while also being recreated. Secondly, triggers of unsafe memories and behavior of a foster child have an impact on family management, as removing or controlling the triggers of a foster child in order to keep them safe, also means keeping others safe from a confrontation with the foster child's history. One unsafe experience is prevented, while another is too. Consequently, it is important to be aware of the impact of this rippling effect, for literature suggests that an accumulation of stressors in foster families increases the risk of poor familial outcomes (Julien-Chinn, Cotter, Piel, Geiger & Lietz, 2017).

*“ Families, as a social system, negotiate, create, and recreate risk and safety ”*



## CHAPTER 5

The family narratives revealed the influence of unsafety on the involvement of the foster parents. As similarly reported in several studies (e.g., Brown & Calder, 1999), foster families in the present study report their fear and awareness of the risk of abuse allegations. Consequently, several foster fathers reported to be limited in performing (intimate) care-giving activities, again similar to what literature on this suggests. However, as in these studies (e.g. Gilligan, 2000; Heslop, 2016; Inch, 1999; Newstone, 2000), our results suggest that a relationship with a paternal fostering figure may provide opportunities of growth for the foster child. More specifically, as we found unsafety to be a dynamic concept, it should also be viewed as a reversible unwanted state. Therefore, is it necessary to move beyond a binary perspective of (male) family members as either threat and threatened or not. Fostering males, adult or under aged, should be considered as helpful partners in a foster child's development (Masson, Hackett, Philips & Balfe, 2013).

This study illustrates that foster mothers are mostly perceived as non-threatening, nor are most of them personally threatened. This is interesting, as several children are reported to have been abused by a female figure. Nonetheless, in the families studied most foster mothers identify as the primary care-giver, as most of them are stay-at-home-moms. However, parallel to the foster fathers' isolation of not care-giving, we found foster mothers' experience of isolation as well. Their experience mostly was characterized by being one of the only 'safe' persons in the family able to perform certain tasks, in addition to feeling highly responsible to procure everyone's safety. For example, similar to other studies (Macaskill, 1991; Masson, et al., 2013) these foster mothers narrated they felt the need to constantly monitor the child's contact with the other children. It appears that the foster mothers' protection of foster father by undertaking the extent of care-giving activities, and their instinct to protect their children from harmful experiences, add to the strain of their fostering experience. Although some studies suggest a foster father's limited part in intimate caregiving (for instance, Macaskill, 1991), the consequences of this advice are not considered, for example for their female partners. Yet, in our study these have become very apparent at the family level. Thus, the importance of respite and some relief of everyday caregiving tasks of foster mothers seems key in similar fostering situations.

With regard to the birth children two groups stood out in this study: the threatening and threatened birth sons, and the caregiving or protecting birth daughters. The first group, the older sons of foster parents, reported how the emotional distance of a foster child caused them to be less engaged in developing a sibling-relationship. Furthermore, as their parents anticipated on unsafe situations, some boys were required to maintain physical distance. These results suggest that keeping the teenaged boys safe by minimizing their role makes them possibly less engaged

in the overall fostering process. This is in contrast to the study of Sutton and Stack (2012), who found that when birth children viewed themselves as active participants, this added to the young person's ability to adjust, 'and their willingness to remain part of a fostering family, in spite of challenging events' (p.12). As the present study revealed a marginalized sibling role of some teenaged sons, it is important to consider the possible isolating consequences of this.

Subsequently, several teenage, care-giving daughters in our study appeared to gain an important role in the fostering system, yet, inadvertently they were themselves exposed to unsafe experiences. More specifically, they reported having unsafe experiences because they were thought to be less of a risk to foster children; therefore, they executed caregiving tasks whereas their male siblings were explicitly excused from these tasks. In our study, as in the study by Serbinski (2017) most of these caregiving teenage daughters discussed their experiences with their parents in order to process them. However, this specific group of teenagers should not be overlooked by social workers, as they gained profound role in the fostering process.

Lastly, Thompson et al. (2016) found the age of birth children was an important factor in their involvement in a fostering experience, as younger children were often less involved than older birth children. However, it seems that birth children of all ages may be equally vulnerable. Firstly, foster parents in our study felt they could discuss unsafe experiences with their birth children, because they are teenagers. Some birth children, however, experienced complications in fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse, as sexuality was suddenly seen in dark light. Our results imply some loss of sexual innocence does not just concern younger children, moreover, sexualized behavior seems to evoke some issues in teenagers. (Hardwick, 2005; Macaskill, 1991). Secondly, some teenaged birth children struggled incorporating a newly gained dimension into their growing identity: Being a threat simply by being present or by acting altruistically seemed challenging. The consequences of this should be considered.

### **Strengths and limitations**

With regard to the results of this study, we have to consider the influence of the design and selection of families and participants. Firstly, we have chosen to review safety on the level of families by creating family narratives. Despite our efforts, we have not been able to add the foster children's perspectives in the family narratives. Learning from their personal stories of unsafety and safety would greatly help to optimize out-of-home-care for them. Secondly, we have to consider the influence of the composition of the families in our study, in addition to the actual participants per family. For instance, most of these families could be considered quite conservative and traditional in terms of religious beliefs, culture, and gender identity. This may

influence their attitude and thoughts on sexuality and the execution of familial roles. Moreover, it is possible that in two family narratives in which the protector position dominated, this was caused by the lack of participation of foster father.

These limitations notwithstanding, reviewing the family narratives allowed us to gain insight in the relational aspects of unsafety. Through this complex and time-consuming process we learned about the dynamics between threatened, threatening and protecting family members. Our study has highlighted that to some degree fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse is fear-based work, in which risks, and anticipation of risky situations, influence everyday life. More specifically, our study showed that fostering a child with a history of sexual abuse requires much knowledge and skills of foster families.

### **Implications for practice and research**

Although feelings of unsafety seemed to be a current issue to some foster fathers, their teenage birth sons, and their foster children, this could also be viewed as an opportunity. In particular, our results suggest that certain relationships between foster family members create feelings of unsafety, as well as an opportunity to grow. Moreover, it seems that other foster familial relationships can facilitate the safety needed to grow in threatening relationships. Therefore, it is important to all foster family members and their social workers to firstly discuss emotional, physical, and sexual safety. In addition, it is important to reflect on how foster family members position themselves. For example, do they see themselves merely as a threat or threatened and are they disengaged, or do they see the opportunity to grow from this? When unsafe feelings are a topic of conversation, plans for safe care can be made in order to minimize the experienced or anticipated risks of abuse allegations.

Secondly, the rippling consequences of one person's unsafety need to be considered. Social workers can actively work on establishing safety for all family members by an open discussion of the topic and shaping appropriate activities together or apart from each other. With conscious choices of investment, family members remain or become more engaged in the fostering process, which is essential to lessen the impact of unsafety on everyday fostering life.

Furthermore, future research on this topic is needed to broaden our knowledge and awareness on the features pressing on family systems with regard to unsafety. For instance, it would broaden our view to study the experiences of (un)safety of same-sex fostering couples, as they establish a safe living environment that moves beyond gender roles. In addition, when reviewing unsafety in the everyday life of foster children from their perspective, this would give insights that are essential in improving their care.

## Conclusion

Finding out who is safe and reliable is a complex process, as one family member's unsafe feelings seemingly impact the family system. Many foster families highlighted the relational aspects of (un)safety, as unsafety in one relationship, or anticipation thereof, has consequences for the other members of the family. Our results indicate that creating a safe living environment for all family members is a continuous, yet, sometimes implicit task. Furthermore, this study shows the importance of the underlying dynamics of unsafety in families. We deem it necessary to take note of all family members' experience of unsafety, as this has been proven to be impactful on everyday life.

