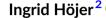**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

CHILD & FAMILY SOCIAL WORK WILEY

When young people age out of care: Foster care in a life course and network perspective

Inger Oterholm[1] | Ingrid Höjer[2]

[1]Faculty of Social Studies, VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway

[2]Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Göteborg, Sweden

Correspondence
Inger Oterholm, Faculty of Social Studies, VID Specialized University, PB 184, Vinderen, Oslo 0319, Norway.
Email: inger.oterholm@vid.no

Funding information
Children's Welfare Foundation Sweden

Abstract

Research highlights the importance of supportive relations for young people leaving care. Foster carers give an important contribution to such support. However, there is less knowledge about foster carers' views about the relational contact after the young person has aged out of care. This article explores foster carers' perspectives building on interviews with foster carers from both Norway and Sweden about their views on relational continuity. Life course and network theory are used as theoretical lenses to understand the opportunities and challenges for further contact both with cares and extended foster family. Findings suggest that foster carers have a lifelong perspective, still the relationship can be uncertain and some result in breaks. Viewed from a life course perspective, the relationships can also be renewed, and foster carers and other members of the foster family seem to be important sources of support for young people with a care background.

KEYWORDS
aftercare, ageing out of care, foster care, life course theory, network theory

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the Nordic countries, as in several other countries, foster care is the preferred placement when young people cannot live with their family of origin. In Sweden, 72% (18,700) of children and youth in out-of-home care were placed in foster care in 2022 (Socialstyrelsen, 2023). In Norway, about 90% (9500) of children in out-of-home care stayed in foster care at the end 2022 (Norwegian statistics, table 12845).

Generally, foster care is meant to be temporary. Nevertheless, children and young people often remain in care over time, and many young people are living in a foster home when they reach the age of majority. When the young person turns 18, the care order formally ends, both in Norway and Sweden. The situation thus becomes uncertain—emotionally, legally and financially—for many young people. A care placement is a public arrangement for which child welfare services are responsible; when the placement ends, these relationships become more of a private matter. Young people thus face sensitive, difficult questions, such as 'Do my foster carers want me as part of the family?' and 'Is foster parenting just a job?'

In recent years, there has been an increased professionalization of foster care (Schofield et al., 2013; Strand & Grønningsæter, 2013; Wilson & Evetts, 2006). Foster parenting has become more akin to a professional job, and when one young person moves out, another moves in. Research points to kinship care as being more stable than other foster care placements and as including more frequent contact with the family of origin (Backe-Hansen et al., 2010). Different types of foster care may suggest variation in relationships. However, little is known about foster carers' experiences related to the aftercare period and their views on further relational contact, which is the focus of this article.

Young people themselves point to a need for support and to difficult transitions to adulthood when ageing out of care (e.g., Hiles

et al., 2013; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010; Paulsen & Berg, 2016). They describe the importance of various types of support, including social, emotional, practical, affirmational, participative and financial support. Such support has been found to be important but not always available, as many young people lack access to an informal network of adults to support them. Continuing relationships with the foster family could thus help them cope with some of these challenges. Indeed, having good relationships with caring adults, being listened to and able to influence their own lives, and receiving support and encouragement are found to be important when young people make their first efforts to live independently, after leaving care placements (Paulsen & Thomas, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2005). Being in extended care may increase the likelihood of continuing education, being employed and having a more gradual transition to adulthood (e.g., Courtney, 2019; Courtney et al., 2021; Munro et al., 2012; Okpych & Courtney, 2020). Still, the effect is not conclusive, and for instance, eligibility criteria and differences between groups can influence the outcomes. The term extended care may also have different contents, which makes it difficult to compare (Courtney, 2019; OECD, 2022; van Breda et al., 2020). Norwegian register studies show that a larger proportion of those who receive aftercare than those who do not, complete upper secondary school. One of the aftercare measures are the possibility to continue to stay in foster care after reaching 18 (Drange et al., 2022; Valset, 2018). The role of foster carers has also been found to be significant in relation to accomplishing education (Jackson & Ajayi, 2013).

These studies point to the importance of continuing contact with carers. So what is known about foster carers' views on continuing contact and support after young people have left care? Some interviews with foster carers have been conducted as part of studies focusing on young people in foster care—one of which is Andersson's (2009) longitudinal study. The interviews with the carers took place while the children were under 18; thus, they did not include carers' views about aftercare. In some studies, foster carers with children under 18 were asked about the future (Blythe et al., 2013; Munford & Sanders, 2016). They expressed an enduring commitment to the foster child and anticipated that their role in the foster children's lives would continue as the children matured into adulthood. In one study, the foster children were mostly underaged, but a few were above 18 (Christiansen et al., 2013). Most of the foster carers expected the foster children to be part of their network in the future, though they were uncertain about this, due to the contact being dependent upon the young person's decision. In Schofield and Beek's (2009) longitudinal study 'Growing Up in Foster Care', some of the young people were aged 18 to 20. However, the themes in the interviews with the foster carers were unrelated to future contact, centring more around children's developmental progress related to the secure base model. In one study from Northern Ireland, the researchers aimed to learn from formerly fostered adults who had maintained relationships with their carers, and in this project, foster carers were also interviewed (MacDonald & Marshall, 2021). The foster carers described how they saw foster care as a life-long commitment, and they continued to offer practical help after the young people had moved out. In a UK study focusing on the possibility

of staying in care after turning 18, a common explanation for why foster carers gave young people the option of remaining in care was the carers' strong attachment to them (Munro et al., 2012).

Despite these handful of examples, to our knowledge, little research exists related to foster carers' experiences once young people have aged out of care. The present study contributes to this research field, with the following research question:

How do foster carers view their contact with their foster child when they age out of care, and how do carers describe former foster children's other relational contacts with family network?

2 | NORWEGIAN AND SWEDISH CONTEXT

In Norway, the child has a right to aftercare until 25 if the young person have had measures from child welfare before turning 18, consent to further support and has a need for support (Child Welfare Act, 2021[1]). In Sweden, the law states that social services should provide support after the ending of a placement, but the legislation is vague (chapter 5, §1 Social Services Act). If the placement is done through a care order (SFS 1990:52), it may last until the young person turns 21 years of age.

There are no specific aftercare programmes neither in Norway or Sweden (OECD, 2022). In Norway, all types of support after 18 are termed 'aftercare'. The most common aftercare measures in Norway are remaining in foster care, supported housing and financial assistance.

In Norway, around 1600 youths got aftercare support when they were 18 in 2022. The number of youths getting support are reduced per year they grow older. There are no specific statistics of youth ageing out of care. But when comparing how many had measures at 17 years of age in 2020 (2201 youths) with how many 19-year-olds had measures in 2022 (1252 youths), it is about 57% having measures at 19.

In Sweden, there are no formal aftercare services, and the statistics are imprecise. According to statistics from 2023, 3836 young people 18–21 years of age left a placement in out-of-home care in 2022 (in all types of care). Of these, 496 had a new decision, based on chapter 5, §1 in the Social Services Act, which is an indication that they stayed in care after turning 18. However, there are no more age-specific data available (Socialstyrelsen, 2023).

The intention with foster family care is to create private, family-like relations, but it is also a public arrangement organized by child welfare services. Foster carers have a contract with child welfare and are also paid. In both Norway and Sweden, the payment is divided into two parts: one that is meant to cover expenses and the other as compensation for the work carers do. This differs in amount; some receive a comparatively small allowance, while others receive payment as though for a part-time or full-time job. The work compensation is dependent on the needs of the young person placed in care. When the young person turns 18, the agreement between foster carers and the child welfare services and the amount of compensation must be settled yet again.[2] In Sweden, the social services can prolong the contract with foster carers, if there is a need for continued care (Socialstyrelsen, 2020).

3 | METHOD

We found interviews to be best suited to obtaining knowledge about foster carers' experiences and relations with the foster children once they leave care. The selection criteria were foster carers who had fostered children who had aged out of care. This was to ensure that the foster carers had experiences with the aftercare period. To ensure variation regarding foster care arrangements (Mason, 2002), traditional foster carers, kinship foster carers and professional carers were included. These different forms of foster care reflect existing differences in care arrangements, which entail different relations and contracts with child welfare services and the young person and may thus point to relevant variations in foster carers' experiences.

The foster carers were recruited through local child welfare offices in Norway and Sweden and through foster care associations. The foster care associations circulated the call on their closed Facebook pages, and several foster carers contacted the researchers directly. Some participants were also recruited via other foster carers.

An interview guide was developed to help facilitate the interviews. A few questions were included on how the carers had generally experienced fostering, but the guide focused mainly on their experiences with youths who were 18 and older. The questions concerned their contact and follow up with the young person and how they viewed their own role as a foster parent in relation to their foster child transitioning to adulthood. The interview guide built on the authors' earlier research about foster care and aftercare. The interviews initially took place in the foster carers' homes, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, several of the interviews were also conducted online. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The project followed the ethical requirements of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, now Sikt; ID: 238421) and from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (dnr: 2019-04365). Participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed that they could withdraw from the project at any time. We were aware of the possibility that the questions could raise difficult feelings for the foster carers and tried to facilitate the interviews accordingly by, for example, setting aside enough time to let them tell their stories and ensuring that they had people they could talk to. The foster carers underlined the importance of research in this field and said they would like to participate. For confidentiality reasons, the foster carers have been given fictive names.

In total, 27 foster families were interviewed: 13 in Norway and 14 in Sweden (in total 35 carers). Their experience included 19 children moving out of the foster home in Norway and 56 in Sweden. The Norwegian sample had experience from one to five placements, with two thirds having had one placement. The Swedish sample had experience from 1 to 109 placements (two thirds had over 10 placements). The youths were placed in foster homes at various ages, both as small children and as teenagers. This sample reflected a variation in foster homes, including kinship cares, traditional foster homes and professional homes.

We were in continuous contact concerning the information provided by the foster carers. When we had completed interviews with 35 carers, we found that our sample included enough rich and varied information to perform our analyses.

The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and Swedish, which are similar languages. Both authors read the interviews from both countries, while taking primary responsibility for the material from their respective countries. When analysing the interviews, NVivo was used to code the text and later categorize the relevant themes that emerged, following Braun and Clarke (2006). The authors discussed preliminary categories several times to ensure a common understanding and that relevant aspects were included. An important theme in the interviews concerned relationships—both establishing relationships in the first place, when the child moved into the foster home and how relationships unfolded when the young person turned 18 and later moved out. For this article, all codes about relational contact were systematized including relations between foster carers and foster child, the foster child's relations with the wider family network in the foster family and the foster child's contact with parents of origin.

3.1 | Limitations

This article builds on interviews with foster carers. Interviews with youths and their parents may have offered other perspectives. It is a small sample and not statistically representative but nevertheless represents the variation in care arrangements: kinship foster care, traditional foster homes and professional foster homes and can thus be relevant for different care arrangements.

4 | THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: LIFE COURSE AND NETWORK THEORY

During the analysis, knowledge and concepts from life course and network theory were found valuable for exploring the relational contacts described by the foster carers. Life course theory highlights the importance of transitions experienced by people across the life course. Transitions often involve changes in status, identity or roles (Elder et al., 2003; Hutchison, 2019). Typical examples of transitions related to family life are leaving the family home, marrying, becoming a parent and death. Other kinds of transitions include commencing education and entering the job market. Transitions often involve the entrances and exits of people and can both be stressful but also provide opportunities for change. Life course theory also underlines the importance of the age when transitions and life events occur, which is referred to as the 'timing of lives' (Hutchison, 2019). Many social institutions are organized around age, and for foster children turning 18 (and reaching the age of majority), this has a special meaning, as it means having to decide about aftercare support.

The interdependence of human lives and the life-long process of human development is emphasized in life course theory (Elder et al., 2003; Hutchison, 2019). The concept of 'linked lives' is foundational and refers to an understanding that people's lives are connected over the course of their lives (Elder, 1994). Family members are seen as an important source of both support and control, but the influence of friends, colleagues and other relationships are also important for understanding how people's lives are linked (Black et al., 2009;

Brady & Gilligan, 2020). The concept of linked lives has been found to be a valuable conceptual tool when analysing how relationships influence the educational journeys for care-experienced adults (Brady & Gilligan, 2020). In the present article, the concept of 'linked lives' has helped us to understand foster carers' description of their lives as related to their foster children's lives and how the young person's relationships are connected to a wider network, including relations to family of origin and the extended foster family.

Pointing to the fact that lives are linked, however, does not reveal how they are linked. Network theory was found to be a useful supplement to life course theory. This theoretical perspective can add concepts about network characteristics, such as closeness, frequency and qualities of ties (Alwin et al., 2018; Settersten, 2018). Close networks are found to provide both control and support (Fyrand, 2005). Still, the strength of weak ties is also key to understanding network relationships (Granovetter, 1973), as weak ties can create bridges to new groups of people and expand peoples' network. Network theory is thus underlined as an important method for studying foster youths' possibilities for support when leaving care, as network structure and composition can indicate the potentially available support (e.g., Blakeslee, 2012; Blakeslee, 2017).

5 | FINDINGS

While the interviews focused on the period after the youths turned 18, the foster carers nevertheless spoke a great deal about relational work, both before and after the youth turned 18. From a life course perspective, the importance of viewing the life cycle in context is emphasized; we have therefore also included the foster carers' reflections from the beginning of the placement in this article. When describing relationships with the foster child once they had moved out, the following themes were highlighted: a life-long perspective of foster family life; balancing family relations; possibilities for expanding networks; uncertain relations in transition; and lastly, breakups and changing relations across the life span. We did not find specific differences across the countries related to the topic of the article.

5.1 | Demanding start: creating relationships

Although the focus of the interviews was on aftercare, the foster carers described how they expended considerable effort on establishing relationships with their foster child. Several foster carers described a challenging start to the placement. For example, Sofie commented:

> I had not imagined that it would be so demanding (...). I like a lot of children. But I was quite unprepared for the fact that it was a completely unknown child who came, and that you are not just fond of a completely strange child who also rejects you. I recognized it as an incredibly tough mental process.

The foster carers described how demanding it was to establish a relationship with children they did not know, some of whom had experienced difficult relationships. Several carers described how their foster child was affected by a difficult childhood:

> Throughout his whole childhood, he was affected by having experienced being abandoned, and not getting food and so on (...). It has been so much to follow up and we have endured and endured and held him. We also did get help from mental health services and supervision.
>
> (Ingegerd)

This glimpse into the foster carers' experiences early in the placements illustrates that the relationship with their foster child was something into which they had placed considerable effort to build and maintain. The connection between different periods of life is highlighted in a life course perspective.

5.2 | A life-long perspective of foster family life

Most of the foster carers described how they saw their foster child as part of their family—both in the present and in the future. They articulated this explicitly and described examples of their continued contact with the foster children after they had moved out. When asked about her experiences with foster care, Camilla replied that it had been her dream to be a foster carer, as her parents. She continued: 'It is quite natural for me, and I think it has been wonderful and those two girls are our children'. Here, Camilla says 'our children', even though the girls had regular contact with their birth mother, and they also were seen as part of their family of origin. Another foster carer framed the relationship in a similar manner: 'He is part of our family. It's been a long time since he moved out, but he always comes home on Mother's Day and on my birthday' (Gunnel).

For many families, celebrating anniversaries is important, and most of the foster carers talked about how their foster children would come for Sunday dinners, birthdays and Christmases after they had aged out of care. As Elsa said:

> And now when she's out of the system, when she's going home for Christmas, then here is where she comes. When she's going home to celebrate the 17th of May (Norway's National Day), and when she's going home this weekend, this is where she comes. We are home, and we will always be there for her, of course.

Elsa's reflections, similar to those of other foster carers, show that her foster daughter is included in family gatherings even after she has aged out of care. Having a place to go for holidays and celebrating anniversaries are important signs of being part of a family and how lives are linked.

Another foster mothers' reflections concerning how she thought about the foster child's place in their family illustrates both how the foster child was treated in the same way as her other children but also that they need it to be underlined:

> It's kind of the same as you say to all your kids, whether they are foster children or not, so 'Remember, no matter when you grow up and start thinking about moving out, you know that the doors here with us are always open; no matter how bad things are, you can always come home'. (…) And it is perhaps even more important for a foster child because the foster child knows that you have borrowed him or her, [that] they are not your biological child (…)—to know that this family is their family for the rest of their lives, and that is very important.
>
> (Anne)

Like Anne, other foster carers expressed an understanding that the foster child would continue to be part of the foster family. In the quote above, Anne is emphasizing that it is important for the foster child to know this. Though she and her husband had only had one foster child, this understanding was also reflected in the interviews with foster carers who had had several placements. For example, Dagny said:

> When you get a foster child, you have the assignment for a certain time, or some years, but you have the assignment forever. The child is actually there. You cannot force yourself on the child, but you must think that you will be there. You cannot think, I'll take it for two years and no more.

Dagny and other carers expressed a life-long commitment. All the foster carers emphasized the importance for their foster children to have the possibility to come home (to the foster home) when needed and to feel like the foster family is also their family.

In some situations, the foster children's siblings had also become a part of the foster family. As one foster mother, Terese, explained about the foster daughter's brother:

> She's part of the family. And it's not just that—when she comes to us on Christmas Eve, in a few days, you can't say that her brother isn't allowed to come. Because they are very close, and it's very good for the two of them to live together. They have a lot of support in each other. So of course, he must be there too.

Another foster mother, Fiona, talked about her relations to her foster sons' sisters and also how they perceive this relation. 'Both his sisters have said that they look upon us as their family'. The foster carers' stories highlight how their lives are linked to the foster children across time, unrestricted by the timeframe of the official placement.

Although the foster carers saw the foster child as part of the family, it did differ as to how often they were in contact once the foster child had moved out. The experience of one foster mother illustrates this. Frida had several foster children and talked about how she had daily contact with one of her foster daughters, though this foster daughter had moved out many years ago and had children of her own. Frida remarked: 'She is quite dependent on us—calls every day'. By comparison, another of Frida's foster daughters mostly visited them on holidays. Following network theory, however, frequency of content does not necessarily imply anything about the content of that contact; one can be important in people's lives even if the contact is less frequent (Fyrand, 2005).

5.3 | Balancing family relations

The foster carers conveyed an understanding of the foster child as also being part of their family of origin. Most of the foster children had contact with their parents. Usually, the foster carers talked about how they tried to facilitate contact between parent and child and how this was an ongoing process—which continued after the young person had aged out of care. For example, Frederik spoke about how he and his wife tried to include both families:

> You have to remember that these children also have a wish to belong to their family of origin. Even if we invite them to our family, there is this built-in distance. I usually say that 'as long as you are here, you are part of our family, and you always will be'. But I have learnt that this situation is vulnerable. As a foster carer, you need to talk about their parents and relatives, integrate them into our family, make their history part of our family narrative.

This quote illustrates how the foster carers tried to link the families together and how these relationships could be precarious. Some of the foster carers had experience with several placements, and they described how it could differ as to whom they had contact with. As Heidi's reflection illustrates:

> I have said that they are all welcome. Not everyone wants to. One doesn't have any contact with her family. I have had a couple of phone calls with her brother. The first one, she had her mother visiting here. So, we talked with her and had a meal and so on. With the third one, I have contact with her grandmother, but not the mother. (…) Of course, it is an intrusive intervention to move a child, so not all want to collaborate with foster carers.

The foster carers conveyed an understanding of the parents' difficult situation and wanted to be flexible around contact. The carers spoke about following up with them concerning contact with their

family of origin also when the youth had moved. Elin explained for instance how she went with her foster child to visit his grandmother who were terminally ill. Sofie described how important it was for her foster daughter that Sofie helped her to organize a meeting with the girl's mother. Though her foster daughter had left care, she needed help around contact with her mother and also did not want to meet with her alone. The foster carers felt a responsibility to support the youths around their family relations.

The stories related by the foster carers show how their lives continue to be linked to the foster child's family of origin even after the young person has aged out of care and that the youth may require continued support around family contact.

5.4 | Possibilities for expanding network

Several of the foster carers spoke about how the foster child had contact with other members of the foster family, like the foster carers' siblings and parents. One of the foster mothers gave a typical example when she described her foster daughters' relations to other members of the foster family:

Terese::	She says that my mother is Grandma and imagines her as a grandmother. She has gone there alone on holidays, on weekends and such.
Interviewer::	So, she's got a big family.
Terese::	Yes, she's got a big family, and her brother has also been there.

Several foster carers described how their own parents sometimes assumed the role of grandparents for the foster child. Ingegerd described her foster daughters' relations to Ingegerd's mother in this way: 'She does love my mother. We also called my mother and father "grandmother" and "grandfather." We lived nearby, so she had a lot of support from them'. Several of the foster carers mentioned how foster children were included and supported by the extended foster family network: 'He doesn't only have us (foster carers), but the whole family: [My] children and sons-in-law can help him if he needs' (Hillevi).

Having more people in their network gives former foster children further possibilities for support. Moreover, the foster carers themselves receive support from their family network when needed, once the youth has moved out. One foster mother, Tone, described how her family provided follow up if she could not.

If I'm going away or something, then my daughter or my sister is backup. There has to be a backup, someone who can go to her, or come with her to the hospital if necessary. So, my family is backup if I'm not available.

The foster carers' stories offer several examples of how the foster child is linked to other members of their foster family. This contact can also facilitate support. They continue to be part of the extended foster family. These descriptions of network contact illustrate network cohesion, where several of the members have contact. Network cohesion indicates network stability and possibilities for numerous contacts (Blakeslee, 2012).

The foster carers noted how the family network seemed especially important for some of the foster children. They described how their foster child struggled around relationships and that they felt a great deal of responsibility to help the young person with these relational difficulties. They gave a great deal of support and also worried about the young person. As Anne stated:

I am very worried about her, especially when she pushes me away and when she's angry. When you make demands on her, even small ones, she can't stand it. You can't talk to her. And then she's very lonely. I don't think she has anybody. There's no one left. I think she's very lonely at the moment.

Several of the foster carers were worried about the limited social network to which the young people had access and how dependent they were on their foster carers though they were in their 20s.

5.5 | Uncertain relations in transition

Interestingly, the foster carers also reported that, though they maintained contact with some of their foster children, they were not always certain whether the contact would continue. They also described how this relationship differed from their relationship with their biological children.

There is a fear: Will he be in touch when he has moved (…)? It's a slightly different feeling from when my biological children moved. You have a fear that we won't stay in touch. We've talked about it, that 'it's important that you come back home. And we want that, and yes, we want you on Christmas' and such.

(Jenny)

Here, Jenny describes how the relation was more uncertain with her foster son compared to her biological children. She, like other foster carers, often stated that she felt responsible for reassuring the foster child that this relationship was lasting. Elin illustrated this when she said:

He should have no doubt that my feelings are real. That I spend time with him now, that I don't get a penny from the child welfare service—I think he's very scared of that. That I might not want to do anything together with him anymore. I think it's very important. That he feels like he's actually part of a family. Not that he is measured in money, and everything is only done because of that.

In this quote, Elin is underlining how fragile the relation could be—because of the formalities of a placement, as well as the uncertainty about what could happen upon termination of the formal regulations. The tension between relationships, love and money is particularly present in the foster care arrangement (Höjer, 2001; Ulvik, 2005). This underscores how foster care occurs at the intersection of private and public relationships. Another foster father described the complexities in the relationships in this way:

> You must not forget that these children also want to belong somewhere else as well. So however, much you so to speak 'invite', there's not just an uncertainty but it can also be a kind of distance, which I think is very complex, but I always tend to have the attitude that when you're here, you're our family, and you can be that for the rest of your life, so to speak. But I can't force it.
>
> (Fredrik)

Several of the foster carers described how moving more permanently out on their own was difficult for their foster child. As Anne described:

Anne::	She was going to move into an apartment. She had turned 22, so now she was old enough to move out. But it was a difficult process, horrible. She probably hasn't gotten over it yet.
Interviewer::	Because she didn't want to?
Anne::	No, she didn't want to, so we've thrown her out.

Here, Anne is describing how the process in which her foster daughter finally moved to a place of her own had been very difficult for all of them. They maintained contact and would help her, when necessary, but they felt that she needed to try to live outside the foster family to become more mature. Other foster carers also told us about this 'final' move being difficult for their foster child.

5.6 | Break ups and changing relations across the life span

Even when the foster carers wanted the child to be part of their family, some of the foster carers with several placements had also experienced placement disruptions. Dagny, for example, spoke about the youth being moved to a residential care facility:

Dagny::	She ran away so much, and she did a lot of things and needed to be in a secure accommodation. And she was there for a long time. She stayed in residential care for about three years after she left.
Interviewer::	Yes.
Dagny::	And later, we have had contact.

The breakdown of a foster care placement might suggest that there will be no contact later, once the youth become an adult. Sometimes that was the case, but like in the quote above, the foster carers also gave examples of instances in which contact was renewed. One foster mother (Ingegerd) talked about how she suddenly received a phone call from a former foster child several years after he had moved out: 'When he called, he asked about all his things, which were important to him, like the toy car he had played with: "Do you have it?" I have saved his things'. These stories illustrate how foster carers can become important later in life, even if there was a placement disruption and no contact for several years. Some foster carers remained part of the young persons' lives and seemed to be important regardless of how the placement ended. Their lives remain linked, and there is the potential for renewed contact. The possibilities for the re-establishment of contact become more visible if their relationships are viewed within a life course perspective.

However, some of the foster carers also talked about how they did not manage to remain in contact once the foster child became 18. Frida, who had several placements and still maintained contact with some of them, told us about one of her foster daughters, with whom she had ceased contact because the relationship became too demanding.

> There are others, you know, you cannot follow up afterwards. It's impossible when you're 18 and fight with our grandchildren. (…) It's not possible. (…). You get so many nasty messages, and she says so many awful things.

Frida continued by saying that, eventually, there were simply too many negative comments and a lack of respect. She still maintained contact with another foster daughter, however, even though that relationship was demanding: 'And then you have kids who also completely empty you, but they give something back'. These kinds of stories illustrate the relational difficulties some of the foster carers experienced.

6 | DISCUSSION

The results from this study show that foster carers can be part of foster children's lives even once the young person has aged out of care. In other words, their lives are still linked. As described in life course theory, connection continues over the course of people's lives (Elder, 1994; Hutchison, 2019). This relational continuity is important, as young people leaving care often describe loneliness and little support. In the present study, the foster carers' descriptions of continuing relationships are in line with earlier study findings showing that foster parents of children anticipate that their role in the foster children's lives will continue into adulthood (Blythe et al., 2013; Christiansen et al., 2013; Munford & Sanders, 2016).

The continuity of relational contact also points to possibilities for support. The foster carers described support, both practical and

emotional, in different areas. One important area is related to contact with family of origin. The foster carers describe how they continue to support the youths in their contact with their parents and how they include the biological siblings of the foster child. Relations to parents can be difficult for the foster children and having support from their foster carers could thus be important. The importance of foster carers contact with the family of origin has also been found in other studies. Andersson's (2009) longitudinal study found that young people who had stable relations with their biological family also had foster carers with an open attitude towards the biological family. Young people with more insecure relationships with their family of origin as adults had less involved foster carers or carers with a negative attitude towards the family of origin. A review study also showed that outcomes of contact with birth parents were particularly positive when there was a collaborative approach between the families; however, contact was also highlighted as complex, and the authors recommended a flexible approach (Boyle, 2017). In the present study, from foster carers' descriptions of their follow-up around their foster children's contact with the parents, the contact seems to be flexible. Moreover, the follow-up gives the young person an opportunity to have contact with their parents, even when this relationship is complicated. The foster family's inclusion of the foster child's biological siblings also contributes to relational continuity and is an example of how foster carers build bridges to the youth's family. In a life course perspective, then, this gives possibilities for continuity between the siblings, even if they have lived in different families.

The foster carers highlighted the foster children's continued contact with the extended foster family, underscoring how the foster family network can expand the young person's network and also give possibilities for additional support people. In interviews with youth ageing out of foster care, many of them report a lack of support (e.g., Bakketeig & Backe-Hansen, 2018; Höjer & Sjöblom, 2010; Stein, 2012). Being part of a network with opportunities for expanding relational contacts is thus important; moreover, being part of a network over time increases opportunities for meeting new people and expanding one's network even further (Fyrand, 2005:123).

Nevertheless, some foster carers with several placements also spoke about breakdowns. Taking care of children and youth with adverse childhood backgrounds can be demanding; indeed, several of the foster carers told us about how difficult it had been when the child moved into their home and also how they had struggled during the placement. For some, this resulted in a situation in which they felt unable to follow up when the foster child aged out of care. This resonates with research from the UK concerning the possibilities for youths to stay in extended care (Munro et al., 2012; Munro et al., 2022). The authors report that one of the main reasons the foster carers gave for not offering young people the opportunity to stay concerned relational difficulties between the carers and the young person. Another study found that behaviour problems are the most common reason for foster placement breakdown (Konijin et al., 2019). While many of the foster carers spoke about having family-like relations with their foster child, there were also examples of complicated relationships, which then reduce the possibilities for aftercare support.

In our study, the foster carers described some of their foster children as being in a precarious situation: especially those who had had several breakdowns or relational difficulties. In these situations, the transition period, when the foster child moved out of the foster home, seemed then to be an especially vulnerable time. Life course theory underlines the importance of transitions, as they involve changes on several levels, which can be stressful (Elder et al., 2003; Hutchison, 2019). Moreover, for youth with a care background, transition to independent life can trigger separation issues and tensions associated with earlier separations. This underscores the need to help young people to identify and talk about their feelings and how they are experiencing the transition (Dima & Skehill, 2011).

Lastly, following life course theory, the foster carers' stories also show how earlier breaks in contact can be renewed. Even if the young person has not been in contact for several years, the relation between young people and carers can be revived. The possibilities of weak ties is also underlined to understand network relationships (Granovetter, 1973). Terminated contact may be an example of a weak tie that can still be resumed.

6.1 | Policy and practice implications

Young peoples need for continued support after leaving care is evident in our study and in line with young people's views (e.g., Hiles et al., 2013, Paulsen & Berg, 2016). This pointing to the significance of a policy that makes this possible. The importance of the quality of relationships between carers and the young person is underlined both in our research and earlier studies (e.g., MacDonald & Marshall, 2021; Munro et al., 2012, Munro et al., 2022; van Breda et al., 2020). To facilitate lasting relationships, it is important to ensure that foster carers have the support they need while the youth is underage as well as when they age out of care. Foster carers receiving good follow-up and support from child welfare services may contribute to more stable placements; it may also help carers to be better able to maintain contact and relationships with parents (Geiger et al., 2017; Sanchirico & Jablonka, 2000).

7 | CONCLUSION

Findings indicate that, when recruiting foster carers, it is important to have a life course perspective, as they can represent possible life-long relationships. It is also interesting to note, from a life course perspective, that even when there are breakdowns, the foster family can remain part of the (former) foster child's network, providing opportunities for relationships later in life. Foster carers' ties to their former foster child thus remain possible network connections, as are those between the extended foster family and the former foster child. Nevertheless, some young people are especially vulnerable in the transition to adulthood, and child welfare workers must pay this group special attention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Inger Oterholm https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4798-5105
Ingrid Höjer https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4584-1917

ENDNOTES

[1] When the study was conducted, the age limit was 23 years.

[2] https://ny.bufdir.no/fosterhjem/betaling-og-rettigheter/

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How to cite this article: Oterholm, I., & Höjer, I. (2023). When young people age out of care: Foster care in a life course and network perspective. *Child & Family Social Work*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13111