

SHORT REPORT **OPEN ACCESS**

Perceptions About Family Foster Care and Intention of Becoming a Foster Family: A Short Report

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ABSTRACT

Family foster care (FFC) is associated with positive developmental outcomes for children. However, the recruitment and retention of foster families prepared to respond to children's needs are a cross-cutting challenge worldwide and require a better understanding of which factors may influence it. This study analysed the associations between personal characteristics, perceptions about FFC and intention of becoming a foster family in a community sample. A total of 348 Portuguese adults completed an online cross-sectional survey. Participants completed the Integrated Model of Family Foster Care-Perceptions about Family Foster Scale (MIAF-PFFS; ProChild CoLAB & SCML, 2024), comprising five dimensions (perceptions about caregiving, about foster children, about the biological family, about the foster family and about the decision-making process) and answered two questions reporting on their intention of becoming a foster family. Female participants, with higher education, and with children reported higher intention for fostering. More adequate perceptions about caregiving, the biological family and the decision-making process were associated with higher intention for fostering. Regression analyses showed that being female, having children and more adequate perceptions of caregiving of foster children were the factors that most contributed to the intention for fostering. These results highlight how specific perceptions of FFC can enhance individuals' intention for fostering, thus informing targeted recruitment strategies.

Children have the right to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment (UNICEF 2024). When removal from their families is necessary, family-based care, such as family foster care (FFC), can play an important role in children's recovery due to individualized and responsive care, reducing lifelong trauma and relational disruptions (Li et al. 2019; van IJzendoorn et al. 2020). Aligned with European deinstitutionalization efforts (United Nations General Assembly 2019), Portugal is slowly shifting from residential care to FFC, particularly driven by recent legislation amends (Law 139/2019, as amended by Law 37/2025) and

awareness campaigns to recruit foster families (with a 38% increase in children placed in FFC from 2019 to 2023; ISS 2024). Still, as of 2023, only 4% of out-of-home children were placed in FFC, whereas most remained in residential settings (ISS 2024).

The effectiveness of FFC depends on multiple factors, including placement quality and the broader FFC system (van IJzendoorn et al. 2020). Therefore, ensuring that children can be placed with a foster family that best meets their needs and characteristics is an important task, which demands several ongoing system

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Summary

- Recruitment efforts of foster families should target individuals with helping professions, where caregiving skills are expected, as adequate perceptions of caregiving seem to contribute most to the intention of becoming a foster family.
- Recruitment campaigns should highlight the challenges and rewards of fostering to attract individuals with more adequate caregiving perceptions and that can be better equipped to respond to foster child's needs.
- Training programmes should focus on shaping perceptions of sensitive and responsive caregiving.

investments to recruit, train and support foster families (van Holen et al. 2019). The recruitment of foster families is a cross-cutting challenge worldwide (Ott et al. 2023; UNICEF 2024). Research has shown a concerning decline in the number of individuals interested in becoming a foster family, leading to barriers in FFC implementation (Davi et al. 2021). Recruitment challenges include costs, lack of public awareness about FFC and about the needs of children in care, misconceptions and myths surrounding the FFC system and ineffective recruitment campaigns (Ott et al. 2023). These challenges undermine the main target of FFC, which encloses ensuring that children's needs for stability, relational permanence and secure attachment opportunities are met (Li et al. 2019). As a result, children in care may experience less-than-optimal care or placement disruptions that negatively impact their wellbeing and development (Maguire et al. 2024). Tailoring recruitment strategies to the child's best interest is therefore essential to ensure that children are placed in appropriate, responsive and child-centred foster families (Gouveia et al. 2021; Hanlon et al. 2021).

Research has identified different factors that impact the intention of becoming a foster family, such as motivations to be a foster family (altruistic and child-centred reasons; Alves et al. 2024), and familiarity with the child protection system (knowing foster families or working directly or indirectly in child protection; Davi et al. 2021; Gouveia et al. 2021). Other factors related to personal characteristics also influence the intention of becoming a foster family (Contreras and Muñoz 2016; Gouveia et al. 2021; Raudkivi 2020). Research has shown that women are generally more inclined to become a foster family (Contreras and Muñoz 2016; Magalhães et al. 2022). Regarding age and education, some studies suggested that younger individuals and those with a lower level of education are more likely to consider becoming a foster family (Magalhães et al. 2022; Raudkivi 2020) whereas other studies found that older individuals and those with higher levels of education are more inclined to become a foster family (Contreras and Muñoz 2016; Raudkivi 2020).

Nevertheless, individuals' perceptions about FFC (e.g., regarding the resources that a family needs to foster successfully, the characteristics of children in care, the FFC system and perceptions related to the biological family; Contreras and Muñoz 2016; Leber and LeCroy 2012; Negrão et al. 2019) have been identified as important factors influencing the intention of becoming a

foster family (Kantar Public UK 2022). Studies highlight that perceptions regarding successful FFC and the intention to continue fostering are linked to specific foster families' resources, such as time, affection, responsiveness, self-efficacy, financial resources and support from family and services (Raudkivi 2020; Whenan et al. 2009).

However, as the lack of information and misconceptions remains, FFC placement is often mistaken for adoption (Contreras and Muñoz 2016; Negrão et al. 2019), and children in care are perceived mostly as young, victims of physical maltreatment and prone to mental health/behavioural problems (Leber and LeCroy 2012; Negrão et al. 2019). Despite evidence showing that FFC potentially supports secure attachments through well-prepared foster families (Li et al. 2019), the lack of information also influences perceptions about FFC's temporary nature, often raising concerns about the negative impact of relational discontinuity on children postplacement (Negrão et al. 2019). Additionally, the interaction between foster families, biological families and FFC services during contact visits is generally perceived as stressful, due to communication challenges and poor quality of interactions (Contreras and Muñoz 2016; Fuentes et al. 2019).

These negative perceptions about FFC, among other factors (e.g., personal characteristics), may discourage individuals from considering becoming a foster family (Gouveia et al. 2021; Raudkivi 2020). At the same time, such perceptions can attract families whose expectations do not match the needs and best interests of children, thereby potentially compromising placement quality and sustainability from the outset (Daniel 2011). Moreover, studies with prospective and current foster families have shown that misconceptions, feelings of being unappreciated and lack of professional support regarding contact visits are key obstacles to becoming a foster family and to continuing fostering (Kantar Public UK 2022; Ott et al. 2023; Whenan et al. 2009), ultimately impacting not only recruitment efforts but also the retention of foster families.

Studies that directly evaluate the associations between the perceptions about FFC, personal characteristics and the intention of becoming a foster family are still sparse, with most research focusing on the reasons and motivations to foster, primarily exploring the experiences of prospective/current foster families and child protection professionals (e.g., Davi et al. 2021; Kantar Public UK 2022; Magalhães et al. 2022; Negrão et al. 2019; Ott et al. 2023; Raudkivi 2020). Therefore, the present study aims to explore the associations between personal characteristics, perceptions about FFC, and the intention of becoming a foster family.

1 | Methods

1.1 | Participants

A total of 348 Portuguese adults participated in the study (77.3% female), with ages ranging from 25 to 70 years old ($M=40.47$, $SD=10.50$). Most of the participants had higher education ($n=242$, 69.5%) and were currently employed ($n=293$, 84.2%), and approximately 58.3% ($n=203$) were married or cohabiting

and had children ($n=228$, 65.5%). Most of them had no personal experience or contact with family foster care ($n=268$, 77%) or residential care ($n=284$, 81.6%), but more had previous experience or contact with adoption ($n=134$, 38.5%). In general, participants perceived having low ($n=184$, 52.9%) to moderate ($n=155$, 44.5%) knowledge about family foster care.

1.2 | Instruments

1.2.1 | Sociodemographic Questionnaire

Participants reported on sociodemographic (e.g., age, education, marital status and number of children) and foster care-related (i.e., personal experience with family foster care, residential care and adoption, as well as professional experience in the context of child welfare) data.

1.2.2 | Integrated Model of Family Foster Care-Perceptions about Family Foster Scale (MIAF-PFFS; ProChild CoLAB & SCML 2024)

This scale was used to assess perceptions about FFC and includes 73 items organized in five dimensions: perceptions about caregiving, perceptions about foster children, perceptions about the biological family, perceptions about the foster family and perceptions about the decision-making process. Respondents are asked to provide their degree of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). All the dimensions revealed adequate values of internal consistency, ranging from $\alpha=0.71$ (perceptions about the decision-making process) to $\alpha=0.86$ (perceptions about caregiving). Higher scores mean more adequate perceptions.

1.2.3 | Intention of Becoming a Foster Family

Intention of becoming a foster family was assessed through the questions (1) 'Have you considered becoming a foster parent?', answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*), and (2) 'If a proposal was made to your family to take care of a child removed from his or her biological parents, and the decision was up to you alone, what would your answer be?', adapted from Raudkivi's (2020) study and answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*definitively not*) to 5 (*definitively yes*). Higher scores reflect a higher intention of becoming a foster family. Considering the strong correlation between both questions ($r=0.44$, $p<0.001$) and the aims of this study, we computed a composite score of intention of becoming a foster family by averaging the two scores.

1.2.4 | Perceived Knowledge About FFC

Perceived knowledge about FFC was assessed through the question 'Please, classify your own level of knowledge about family foster care using the following scale', answered on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*no knowledge*) to 5 (*very good*).

1.3 | Procedures

This study was part of a larger project (the All4Children project; Baptista et al. 2024) focused on the assessment of the initial implementation of a new model of practice in FFC. This specific study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Iscte – University Institute of Lisbon (approval number 129/2021). Inclusion criteria include being an adult 25 years or older—the minimum age to apply to become a foster family in Portugal (Law 139/2019)—living in Portugal and read/understand the Portuguese language.

Data were collected through an online survey, disseminated through social media and networks of the research team and by child welfare institutions. It contained a brief explanation of FFC and detailed information about the study goals and participants' rights. Participants give their informed consent by checking three statements reflecting their willingness to participate. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and with no financial compensation.

1.4 | Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29.0. Analyses of variance (t test and ANOVA) were used to explore differences in the intention for fostering as a function of categorical sociodemographic variables, and Pearson correlations were calculated for continuous variables. A multiple regression model was conducted to explore the relative contribution of sociodemographic variables and perceptions about FFC on the intention for fostering, considering all the variables in the model. Significance was set at the level $p<0.05$ for all analyses.

2 | Results

Significant differences in the intention for fostering were found for gender, level of education and parental experience. Females revealed a higher intention for fostering ($M=3.09$, $SD=0.79$) than males ($M=2.51$, $SD=0.78$), $t(346)=-5.73$, $p<0.001$, $d=0.79$. Participants with higher education showed a higher intention for fostering ($M=3.04$, $SD=0.80$) than participants without higher education ($M=2.77$, $SD=0.85$), $t(346)=-2.89$, $p=0.004$, $d=0.82$. Furthermore, participants with children also showed a higher intention for fostering ($M=3.03$, $SD=0.87$) than participants with no children ($M=2.82$, $SD=0.71$), $t(286,36)=-2.44$, $p=0.02$, $d=0.82$. No significant results were found for participants' age, marital status, number of children and previous contact/experience with FFC, residential care and with adoption (all p 's >0.05).

Significant correlations were found between intention for fostering and perceptions about caregiving ($r=0.23$, $p<0.001$), perceptions about the biological family ($r=0.11$, $p=0.042$) and perceptions about the decision-making process ($r=0.18$, $p<0.001$), with higher intention for fostering associated with more adequate perceptions in these dimensions. No significant correlations were found between the intention for fostering and perceptions about the fostered child and perceived knowledge about FFC (all p 's >0.05).

A multiple regression model was run considering the sociodemographic variables significantly associated with intention for fostering in the preliminary analyses (i.e., gender, education and having children) and all the dimensions of perceptions as the independent variables and the intention for fostering as the dependent variable. Results showed that gender, having children and perceptions about caregiving were significantly associated with the intention for fostering (see Table 1). Being female, having children and more adequate perceptions of caregiving of foster children were positively associated with the intention for fostering.

3 | Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the associations between personal characteristics, perceptions about FFC and intention of becoming a foster family in a community sample. Regarding personal characteristics, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Contreras and Muñoz 2016; Magalhães et al. 2022), females revealed a higher intention to foster than males, which can be explained by social factors such as gender roles. Although the contemporary literature points to some changes in gender roles concerning the redistribution of responsibilities in the family, namely, for the economic provision of the family, women tend to be more involved in household work and parental care for children than men (Oláh et al. 2018; Perista et al. 2016). Contrary to the findings reported in some studies (e.g., Gouveia et al. 2021;

Magalhães et al. 2022), in our sample, individuals with higher education showed a higher intention of becoming a foster family. These results can be understood within the Resource Theory, which suggests that individuals with higher levels of education may have more resources at their disposal to access information about FFC, making them feel better prepared to cope with the complex demands of fostering (Cox et al. 2003; Maeyer et al. 2014). In line with the literature, individuals with children showed a higher intention to foster, which can be explained by their more realistic and flexible attitudes towards the needs and challenges of caring for a child and, thus, feel more confident in their caregiving abilities (Cox et al. 2003; Magalhães et al. 2022).

Regarding perceptions about FFC, our results showed that more adequate perceptions of caregiving, the biological family and the decision-making process were related to a higher intention to become a foster family. Overall, these findings align with previous research demonstrating that individuals' perceptions about FFC are associated with their intention to foster (Contreras and Muñoz 2016; Kantar Public UK 2022; Leber and LeCroy 2012; Negrão et al. 2019). However, it is important to contextualize these findings within the broader and complex power dynamics inherent in foster care. Literature and practice consistently highlight the existence of power imbalances between foster parents and biological families, as well as tensions and ambiguities in the relationships between foster families and social services (Cannaert and de Wild 2025; Kim et al. 2025; McGregor et al. 2021). These dynamics can influence perceptions, motivations and experiences of fostering and thus should be critically considered when interpreting the observed associations. A seemingly more adjusted profile of individuals with a higher intention of becoming a foster family could be a good starting point, showing individuals can be more aware and capable of the delicate balance of relations implied in foster care. Particularly, our results suggest that people are more willing to foster when they have more adequate perceptions about caregiving. Foster parents face unique demands that go beyond regular parenting: The challenges foster parents encounter call for an especially warm and child-centred approach to caregiving, where affective and behavioural dimensions of distinct quality are essential elements (Berrick and Skivenes 2012). Therefore, it is plausible that a higher intention to foster can come out of more reflected, flexible and sensible perceptions about caregiving that can make individuals more open and tailored to the demands of such a complex role. This result can also be framed within the aforementioned Resource Theory, as adequate perceptions about caregiving can be a valuable advantage to the core task foster families face, informing and facilitating the adjustment to the role of parenting a child who experienced early adversity (Vasileva and Petermann 2016). Furthermore, our results are consistent with prior findings indicating that individuals with more child-centred and altruistic motivations are more willing to foster, suggesting an underlying desire to provide care and love to a child (Alves et al. 2024).

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of key limitations, namely, the reduced sample size and the lack of representativeness, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The recruitment strategy may have inadvertently led to a preselection bias, favouring individuals who were already more informed about or positively inclined towards FFC. This may

TABLE 1 | Multiple linear regression model for intention for fostering ($N = 348$).

Variable	<i>B</i>	SE	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender	0.48	0.10	0.24	4.69	<0.001
Education level	0.13	0.10	0.07	1.30	0.196
Having children	0.24	0.09	0.14	2.66	0.008
Perceptions about caregiving	0.24	0.11	0.15	2.14	0.033
Perceptions about the fostered child	0.04	0.11	0.02	0.38	0.705
Perceptions about the biological family	0.03	0.08	0.02	0.42	0.677
Perceptions about the foster family	-0.08	0.12	-0.04	-0.60	0.547
Perceptions about decision-making	0.04	0.10	0.03	0.41	0.681

Note: Constant = 1.36, $F(8, 339) = 6.93$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.14$. Gender: male (0) and female (1). Education level: with no academic degree (0) and with an academic degree (1). Parental experience: have no children (0) and have children (1).

have resulted in a sample imbalance, particularly regarding educational level and prior knowledge about FFC. Moreover, the recruitment method may have excluded people who have not yet considered becoming foster carers, even though they are the primary target of recruitment efforts. The overrepresentation of certain groups (e.g., women and highly educated individuals) limits the extent to which our findings can inform broader recruitment strategies and warrants caution when interpreting results related to the intention of becoming a foster family. Moreover, the study does not account for potential cultural variations within the country that might influence perceptions of FFC and, consequently, intentions for fostering. Moreover, the recent political investment and awareness campaigns to recruit foster families in Portugal could have influenced our results. Future studies should examine whether these efforts lead to shifts in public perceptions and whether such changes translate into an increased intention for fostering. Additionally, future research should focus on analysing perceptions and intentions among prospective foster families at different stages of the application process, which would provide valuable insights into whether the intention to foster ultimately translates into applications. Within this line, future research could benefit from focusing on specific subpopulations. The identification of characteristics associated with a greater intention to foster should prompt a more in-depth examination of the perceptions held by, for instance, men or adults with lower educational attainment. Such insights could enhance understanding of how to effectively engage and raise awareness among these groups, thereby contributing to a more diverse pool of foster families, which may improve matching processes. Finally, future studies should also consider the characteristics of children when investigating the intention to foster. Although the present study assessed general fostering intentions, progressing towards more tailored and child-centred recruitment and matching strategies necessitates elucidating the perceptions that influence fostering intentions for children with specific age ranges or profiles.

4 | Conclusion

From a practice standpoint, this study provides valuable insights to inform recruitment processes, where the pressure to expand the number of foster families is common and can benefit from an evidence-based approach (Kantar Public UK 2022; Gouveia et al. 2021; Ott et al. 2023). This study suggests that recruitment efforts should consider focusing on contexts where there is an expectation of increased knowledge, ability and sensitivity in care—like helping professions—as the adjustment of the perceptions of caregiving revealed itself as a factor associated with the intention to foster. Also, recruitment campaigns can be tailored to include messages directed at the caregiving role, revolving around the challenges and gratifications of providing care to these children, to attract and capture individuals who show more adequate perceptions of caregiving. On the other hand, these results also support the role of training as a crucial process: thoughtful content and strategies of training, able to foster the adjustment of overall perceptions of FFC, but specifically able to alter and/or reinforce perceptions of sensible and responsive caregiving in response to FFC challenges, could invigorate the intention to foster and therefore maximize the retention of

foster families. These envisioned results are of paramount importance for the Portuguese protection system, committed to deinstitutionalization and shifting to FFC. As recognized by previous studies, children placed in responsive and sensitive foster care often show developmental recovery and improvements in wellbeing (Li et al. 2019; van IJzendoorn et al. 2020). Accordingly, the direct implications of this study for enhancing recruitment and training can help to strengthen the feasibility of FFC within the child protection system, which, ultimately, may benefit child wellbeing.

However, even if recruitment of more foster families is a worldwide priority, ensuring that they will meet children's needs is even more critical. Indeed, many foster families are often not prepared and trained to address those needs (e.g., trauma-related; Smeyne et al. 2025), suggesting that recruitment efforts should be oriented by the child's best interest, realistically underlining children's needs and tailored to families with different profiles rather than oriented by a one-size-fits-all approach. This could increase matching options to better meet children's needs (Sinclair et al. 2004). Even though this orientation could mean a slower increase in the number of foster families, it will enhance the quality and sustainability of placements, minimizing the risk of disruption, thus ensuring that all decisions are anchored in the best interests of the child and guarantee their well-being. Nevertheless, decision-making practices within the foster care system are still mostly adult rather than child centred (Rafeedie et al. 2019). Aligned with this reflection is the need for future studies considering children's voices about which characteristics foster families should have to maximize their well-being and safety.

Author Contributions

Stephanie Alves: writing – review and editing, writing – original draft, conceptualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition. **Joana Baptista:** writing – review and editing, conceptualization, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition. **Cláudia Camilo:** writing – review and editing, writing – original draft, formal analysis, data curation. **Luísa Pereira:** data collection, data curation. **Madalena Correia:** data collection, data curation. **Kamila Araújo:** data collection, writing – original draft. **Mariana Justo:** data collection, writing – original draft. **Sandra Ornelas:** data collection, writing – original draft. **Mariana Negrão:** data collection, writing – original draft. **Helena Grangeia:** data collection, writing – original draft. All authors approved the final manuscript as submitted and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Iscte—University Institute of Lisbon (Approval Number 129/2021).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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