Companions to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Sweden – experiences of Swedish families

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Abstract

Purpose – *Many unaccompanied children have sought asylum in Sweden during recent years. They needed different kinds of support not only from the authorities but also from the local community. The purpose of this paper is to explore how families from local communities can support the children and be the neutral companion they long for.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was adopted for this descriptive study. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.*

Findings – *The families wanted to know more about unaccompanied children than the information presented in the mass media. They showed deep engagement in getting to know the boys and strong affection for them because they got a sense of how difficult their lives were. Families with experience as parents can play an important role to guide the children into the Swedish society and be trustful adults who can complement the professionals in the authorities and accommodations. The families in this project needed more support through information and strategies about how to handle difficult situations during the children's asylum process.*

Research limitations/implications – *This study describes a pilot project in a small municipality in Sweden. The participating families described the support given to a group of boys. More studies should focus on support for girls in similar situation.*

Originality/value – *There are limited studies on how families in local communities can support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.*

Keywords *Sweden, Children, Support, Local community, Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors*

Paper type *Research paper*

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Introduction

During 2015–2019, a record number of Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) sought asylum in Europe, of whom many came to Sweden (Eurostat, 2022). The majority arrived from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia and Eritrea (Swedish Migration Agency, 2022). After 2015, the number of UASC arriving in Sweden decreased from 35369 in 2015 to 507 in 2021 (Swedish Migration Agency, 2022).

Sweden has a long experience of receiving migrants, including UASC. The most well-known groups are Jewish children from Germany during the 1930s, Finnish children during the Second World War (Rädda Barnen, 2022), children from Chile and the Middle East during the 1970s (Swedish Migration Agency, 2022) and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) from Somalia in the 1990s. Different actors, such as SMA, municipalities, county councils, schools and non-governmental organisations (NGO) are involved in the asylum application process and afterwards. UASC under the age of 14 years are often placed in foster care, either with relatives or with families who have lived a long time in Sweden, with or without a migrant background. Older children live in group homes run by the

municipalities or by private companies contracted by the municipalities. Children can stay in the group homes until they receive a permanent place to live in Sweden or are deported (Socialstyrelsen, 2020).

Need for different kinds of support

UASC are under enormous stress during their migration after having left their parents. Often, they have experienced traumatic events in the home country, during transit and in the host country. They do not know the language and culture and are uncertain whether they will be allowed to stay (Brendler-Lindqvist, 2004; Groark *et al.*, 2011). Separation from both parents during adolescence is linked to a higher risk of mental health problems, such as anxiety and posttraumatic stress symptoms, including depression (Derluyn *et al.*, 2009). As children, they are highly dependent on support from adults to assist them with the practical issues, emotional support and building new relationships that can create resilience and a feeling of belonging which is important for their well-being (Osman *et al.*, 2020; Eriksson and Hedberg Rundgren, 2019).

Trust in staff and other adults, and being accepted by society, are also important factors for the well-being of migrant children (Groark *et al.*, 2011). Many UASC express feelings of loneliness and difficulties in creating trust in anyone. Establishing trust is important for individuals working within the supporting structure to understand UASC's feelings and to support them to prepare for their future (Chase, 2010; Godani, 2016). Although UASC receive support from staff, they miss their families and friends and therefore also need stable, caring, family-like relationships that they can lean on and trust. Emotional involvement and affection are most important here (Bjerneld *et al.*, 2018; Chase, 2010; Eide *et al.*, 2018; Godani, 2016; Herz and Lalander, 2017; O'Toole Thommessen *et al.*, 2015, 2017; Wernesjö, 2015).

Within the Swedish system, there are different types of support. The social workers, employed by the municipality, at community level, have the main responsibility for the children's welfare (Stretmo, 2014) and have contacts with the SMA that make decisions in the asylum process. The legal guardian (*god man* in Swedish) represents the child in contacts with authorities in the absence of parents (Sveriges Riksdag, 2005). Staff working in the group homes are employed by the social authorities at community level and responsible to the Migration board. Non-governmental organisations help with activities such as homework and swimming classes (SC, 2020).

After the initial contact for planning the children's time in the community, the social workers meet the children when they have new information to provide, but they do not provide support to children on a daily basis (Herz and Lalander, 2019). The staff at the group homes are responsible for giving the UASC basic care, including help in seeking health care, support in schoolwork and leisure-time activities, on a daily basis (Socialstyrelsen, 2018). Due to high staff turnover and high pressure to arrange accommodation for UASC, the national authorities have decreased the required qualifications for the job [European Migration Network (EMN), 2017], which can vary greatly resulting in staff at group homes lacking necessary expertise [Human Rights Watch (HRW), 2016]. It can therefore be challenging for staff, especially those with limited qualifications and experience to fulfil all the needs of the UASC, especially concerning psychosocial support [European Migration Network (EMN), 2017] and to have long-term supportive relationship with the children (Herz and Lalander, 2019). According to the Nordic Welfare Centre (NWC), there are "fragmented organisational structures with insufficient cooperation between different administrative sectors" when UASC are placed in the municipalities (NWC, 2020).

The concept *Befriending* has been used since late 1900 century in UK, North America and Australia (Behnia, 2007), primarily in the social welfare system or in health, to support individuals with low levels of social support, for example people who are socially isolated like elderly, mental health patients, and refugees (Behnia, 2007). The befrienders

(volunteers) could for example help with escort to medical treatment, immigration interviews and give emotional support (Behnia, 2007). To our knowledge, few befriending projects for UASC have been documented. In 2019, a plan for befriending UASC was presented in Scotland (Scott *et al.*, 2019).

Befriending is a, one-to-one friend-like relationship, organised by an NGO or authority, where the involved can negotiate about frequency and time for the contact. The projects that use the befriending concept are aimed to facilitate the integration, through emotional, informational and instrumental assistance, including learning about the new society and language (Behnia, 2007). The responsible organisations supervise the contacts (Balaam, 2015).

The projects that have used the concept befriending have offered training for the volunteers on "refugees' traumatic experiences, world events, confidentiality, boundary setting, how to work with refugees who have little or no English skills, and how to deal with cultural and language differences and difficult situations" (Behnia, 2007). The concept befriending helps in developing a trusting relationship between the befrienders and the befriendees, which facilitates self-confidence and helps overcome social isolation and the befrienders feel that they have an important role to play (Cassidy *et al.*, 2019). Befriending has been seen as a positive intervention by participants (Balaam, 2015).

The family friend project

Host community might be able to provide the children with support that group home staff might not be able to give. However, UASC often have little or no contact with the community members (Herz and Lalander, 2017; O'Toole Thommessen *et al.*, 2017; Wernesjö, 2015). A local office of Save the Children (SC) in Sweden identified such a group of UASC and initiated a project called *Friend-Families* (FFs) for UASC living in group homes run by the municipality. The aim of the project was to *facilitate integration and social contacts between UASC and Swedish families living in the municipality* (SC, 2016).

The families were recruited through advertising at the municipality's homepage. Before the families were approved as FFs, they had to present documents attesting that they do not have a criminal record, and they were interviewed by the coordinator for UASC at the municipal authority. The coordinator, together with the staff at the two group homes in the community, then matched the children and the families based on their interests and hobbies. The FFs were invited to the group homes to meet "their child." Thereafter, the FFs and the assigned UASC together decided if they wanted to continue to meet for social activities. All participating children were boys. Some of them had been in Sweden for 18 months but still not had a possibility to start the asylum-seeking process until recently. Some of the boys had their asylum applications rejected but still hoped to be able to stay. The boys came from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia and Syria. The FFs met regularly in an informal network coordinated by SC to exchange experiences and to support each other. They had good contact with the coordinator for UASC at the municipal authority and with the staff at the two group homes for UASC.

The concept of *Friend Family* (FF) is quite new in Sweden. To the best of our knowledge, this concept has not been studied before. The main difference between FF and other supporting families, like foster families, was that the children did not live with the FFs but visited them at their homes or met elsewhere for leisure. The FFs were volunteers and the children could choose not to meet the FFs if they did not want to. The FFs had no obligations towards authorities such as the SMA but had entered into an informal agreement with SC who recruited them for the project. As volunteers working for SC, they were supposed to follow the guidelines within the organisation which are based on the Convention of the Rights of the Child (UHCHR, 1989). In practice, it means the FF could do what they think is best for the child (SC, 2020).

When the local SC contacted the authors to evaluate the FF project and suggest recommendations for the future, we found most research on support to UASC focused on the social workers' experiences. Brendler-Lindqvist (2004) stressed the importance for UASC to have a network of supporting adults and the different professionals supporting these children need to have close cooperation. Herz and Lalander (2019) described the importance of building relationships and trust to unaccompanied children and Kohli (2007) described social support in three dimensions *cohesion*, which refers to meeting the practical needs and work in the perspective of the "here and now" to establish trust in the children. The second domain connection, relates to listening to stories from the flight and to their feelings, trying to allow them to experience a feeling of control. Finally, Kohli described *coherence*, supporting in organizing their daily work, acts as a replacer for the parents. Very few studies described the support from the local community in Sweden, for instance, through initiatives such as FFs. We therefore formulated the research question: How can the local community support UASC? The aim of the present study was to find out what motivated the local community, organised as friend-families, to support unaccompanied children, how the support was organised, and how they experienced giving the support. The research of the current project was discussed using befriending concept.

Method

During one of the FFs-network meetings in February 2017, the families were invited to participate in the present study. As not all FFs attended the meeting, an invitation was also sent to them via e-mail. The FFs were provided with information in both verbal and written (information sheet) formats regarding the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of the information obtained from the study, and the contact details of the first author. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participating FFs.

In total, 10 of the 12 FFs that took part in the project during spring 2017 participated in the study. One family did not have time to participate, and one did not answer the invitation, despite reminders. The FFs lived in the same municipality where the group homes were located. Among the FFs, the adults were between 41 and 73 years old and had occupations such as teachers, lawyers, and carpenters. Two of the parents were retirees. All parents were married, except one who was a widow, and they had their own children between the ages of 9 and 20 years old, who lived at home or were adults and had moved out. In total, 25 family members participated in the study.

Some of the families had earlier been active in supporting migrants through churches or NGOs where they had helped with school homework, teaching Swedish or swimming lessons. Others had been volunteers in international aid projects or had been a legal guardian. Most of the FFs had started to engage in the FF project during autumn 2015 when many UASC arrived in Sweden. At the time of the interviews, the families had about one and a half years of experience in being FFs.

Interviews with the 10 families were conducted during spring 2017 using an interview guide, inspired by earlier research on UASC, for example, Brendler-Lindqvist (2004) and Kohli (2007). The questions covered motivation for engagement, expectations, positive and negative experiences, relation to the UASC, activities and lessons learned.

For most of the families with children living at home, the family members were interviewed together in small groups (Morgan, 2019) where participants inspired each other to answer and discuss the questions. In two families, the parents thought the children were too young to participate in the interviews or were occupied with other activities. The interviews lasted about one hour each and took place in the families' homes or, in one case, in a coffee shop.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first author performed line-by-line coding and later organised all related codes into sub-themes and themes. The two authors

reviewed and revised the sub-themes and themes, first separately and then together, resulting in four themes describing the content of the data. The preliminary results were presented to the FFs, and valuable comments were made, which were taken into consideration in the analysis and discussion of the material (Koelsch, 2013).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board, Uppsala, Sweden.

Results

The thematic analysis resulted in the following themes: *Altruism and curiosity being the main motives; practical activities helped to get to know the boys; developed a kin-like relationship; and impossible not having feelings for the boy.* The numbers after the citations reflect the code assigned to the participants.

1. Altruism and curiosity being the main motives

The main motive for the FFs to engage in the project was a wish to build their own opinion about UASC, regardless of the general discourse in the media and society, and to give them a positive start in Sweden.

During autumn 2015, when many UASC arrived in Sweden, the FFs became upset when they heard and saw, through mass media, many of the children not being taken care of in what they thought was a good way. The FFs wanted to meet and get to know some of the UASC to know more about them, directly from them, to see if the reports in mass media were correct, and at the same time learn about other cultures. The FFs thought they learned about how the world is working, including the asylum system in Sweden and about how it is to be raised, for example, in Somalia or in Afghanistan.

> *You can learn a lot about structures and see [what is happening in the world] from a new perspective. You come close to one specific person. Normally, you only read about the migrants as a group. You realise they are not so different from us, which you easily can believe when you only read newspapers [. . .] I think if more Swedes get to know immigrants, they will see that the majority are not strange [. . .] It is easier to dislike a number in the newspaper [. . .] (3).*

Some of the FFs had met UASC in activities arranged by SC, e.g. swimming school, and realised the children did not have closer contacts with Swedish families, which is why they wanted to join the FF project. Others wanted to protest the authorities' way of handling unaccompanied children, while some wanted to take their responsibility as citizens and do something practical for the children and show them that some Swedish people are positive towards migrants. One father said:

> *You cannot only criticise and think one [the authorities] should help, without doing anything yourself to assist with the integration (10).*

One person said he had bad conscious for the inequalities in the world and wanted to compensate for that through the project. He thought more of the asylum seekers should have residence permits in Sweden as it is a rich country and he wanted to help them into the society. Others wanted to show the children the Swedish way of life and at the same time give them a positive start. Through fun activities, they thought the boys could relax and focus on something else other than their worries and loneliness.

2. Practical activities helped to get to know the boys

At the beginning, the FFs were unsure of how to interact with the boys. Gradually, through various activities, they found ways to communicate and learn more about each other. At the same time, the FFs became informants about how the Swedish society works.

In the beginning of the project, the FFs and the boys met about twice a month. During these meetings, the FFs and the boys had difficulties knowing how to interact and communicate.

After some months, the FF found most boys were eager to help with practicalities like cleaning the garden or changing tyres on the car, and they seemed to be proud that they could pay back for the emotional support they received from the FFs. This was also a good way for the boys to learn common words in Swedish, and they could talk to each other in a relaxed way.

> *He speaks perfect English, but you need to have something to talk about. It has been good to do something together[. . .]It is quite fun to do something together, for example, practice to get a driving license, change tyres (5).*

The boys had told the FFs they thought the families had helped them with their integration in Sweden. They had, for example, learned how to search for an internship during the summer vacation, and how the salary is paid.

It was easy for the younger children in the families to get in close contact with the boys, as they liked similar activities, such as playing computer games. The older children had a fruitful exchange of information and discussions about their cultures. One daughter thought she had learned how it was to be in war. Even if the boys and the FFs came from different cultures, she said:

> *We are quite similar[. . .]it is interesting to note that the popular culture is global. He loves the football team Chelsea. That is something you can do wherever you come from* (5).

The boys and the FFs cooked together, discussed homework, watched TV, went to football matches, museums, and celebrated holidays like Christmas together. Many of the interviewees talked about a fantastic Christmas party the FFs and the boys had celebrated together. One woman described the atmosphere as:

> *During the party, we felt the love and appreciation poured out from the boys towards us, the FFs* (6).

The FF described the boys in positive terms, like ambitious, adaptive, polite, intelligent, wise, dedicated, helpful and considerate. They thought the boys were "survivors" with a specific goal in their life, including educating themselves to a specific profession like architect, carpenter, dentist, engineer, garage mechanic, hairdresser, psychologist, teacher or social worker. Some of the boys were illiterate when they arrived, but they had learnt the Swedish language quite well and now could read and write. All boys had learnt how to swim and cycle and had a better understanding of how the society works.

3. Developed a kin-like relationship

The FF had expected they would just be friends but found the boys in need of much more than friendship, which made them more involved in the boys' case.

The boys had told the FFs that the staff at the group homes were good, but they needed friends who were not part of the government's asylum reception system, who were on "their side" and with whom they could relax and forget all the troubles and worries they had and feel they had a belonging to the community.

The FFs had no formal role or responsibility for the UASC like a biological, adoptive, or foster parent. The contacts between FF and the boys were mutually voluntary and not mandated by any authorities. From the beginning, the families were not aware that most of the boys had not received a residence permit in Sweden yet, or even been to the first interview at the SMA. It resulted in a situation where the FFs were unsure about their role in relation to the boys. They expected to be the friends the boys requested, but the FFs said they became more and more engaged in their asylum process and felt they had acted like parents. It was especially problematic when they saw the boys feeling bad and did not receive enough support from the authorities.

This was exemplified when the age for some of the boys was reassessed, and they were considered older by the authorities and categorised as adults; consequently, they lost their

legal guardian. The FFs had, in these situations, tried to help them as far as they could, since no one else supported the children. The FFs had tried to prepare the boys for the interview with the SMA, accompanied them to the interviews and helped them with contacts with authorities and lawyers.

The FFs did not have a right to receive support or counselling from the authorities about how to manage difficult situations. As the interviewed FFs were the first of its kind, SC had no previous experience to be shared, which many FFs desired.

Some of the FF's children talked about the boys like their extra brother, and some of the FFs daughters said the boys called them sister. Other FF children talked about "their boy" as a friend. The girls said that the boys had told them they had never talked to a girl outside their family before they came to Sweden, and some had never seen other girls than their sisters without a burka. They now wanted to learn how young persons in Sweden go out and have fun and how to behave in a correct manner when they meet girls. The FFs said they felt the boys had changed attitudes and now thought women should have the same rights as men to decide over themselves. Gender issues were also discussed when the boys saw a division of work between the parents in the household. One woman said:

> *I was sitting here and talked to the boys, meanwhile my husband prepared the lunch. One of the boys said, 'This would never happen in Afghanistan*, (1).

Some of the women in the FFs reported their boys wanted to call them "mum", which they found problematic. They tried to explain to the boys they could not replace their biological mothers and take the same responsibilities for them as a biological parent and help them in all situations. Other parents thought this behaviour could be a way for the boys to be polite or a confirmation of how important they were for the boys. Another mother said: *I am his Swedish mother. He has his first and second mother* (7), as the family engaged so much with him.

Another example of the FFs feeling great responsibility was when a FF's boy had disappeared from his group home. When the FF contacted the staff, they referred to their professional secrecy and did not tell the FF what they knew about the disappearance. The FF became very worried when they could not get in contact with the boy. One of the FF parents said:

> *We did not know where he was. Did he have any money? Did he sleep in the streets in Stockholm? What had happened? Was he in trouble? It was hard. We phoned him several times per day, but we did not receive any answer* (8).

After some time, the FF received a message through another boy that their boy was ok.

Most of the parents in the FFs were in the same age as the boy's biological parents. The FFs who were old and retired felt they had been very much appreciated by the boys, who had treated them like grandparents. The staff at the group homes explained to these FFs that the boys admire them since they have managed to become old, which is not so common in the boys' home countries and because they have a long-life experience and therefore had easier to understand what migrants have gone through.

4. Impossible not to having feelings for the boy

The role of FF had been more emotionally challenging than expected, but they felt they did their best to help the boys. Over time, the FFs felt all the work was worth it, and they thought it felt nice to do good.

At the time of the interviews, the FFs realised they had been too afraid in the beginning to ask difficult questions about their journeys and home situation, as they were afraid of making the boys sad. The FF became more emotionally engaged with the boys than they expected. One FF mother expressed as follows:

> *I have accompanied him to an interview, and he cried. It is impossible not having feelings for the boy. It is totally impossible. One cannot be cold-hearted. He is so vulnerable* (4).

All families felt good about being a FF. Even if the boys would be deported from Sweden, the FFs had had the possibility to show them there are some good people in the world who care for children like them. One of the children in a FF said she thought they were part of a peace project and did well in a larger perspective since the boys came here because they did not want to be soldiers in a war. Another family thought the contact with the boys enriched their life.

The FFs were surprised and disappointed the asylum process was so complicated and slow. They thought the boys were treated in a terrible manner. One woman said: *I think they treat these boys in ice-cold way* (4). Another parent said:

> *I could not imagine it [the asylum process] would take such a long time, and they would let the boys live in this uncertainty (1).*

The FFs thought that the boys were smart but doubted whether they would psychologically manage if they would receive a negative decision and must leave the country. The FFs therefore discussed how they would react and said they would not hide the boys but try to support them in other ways, for example, through sending money. At the same time, the FFs thought it was very painful to think of such a scenario. In this difficult situation, they appreciated the network for the FF to which they could turn for advice and discussion, especially when they did not receive any guidance or training on how to work with UASC from authorities or SC. One woman summarised her experience in these words:

> *I have found some humbleness to these boys. They come from another part of the world, but they feel emotionally very close. I have learned how enormously positive it is to do good [. . .] Even if they are deported, it has been important for them. We have been here for them (4).*

The FF expected there would be more differences between the Swedish culture and the cultures the boys came from, and therefore problems in the meetings. However, the differences were not that big, except for the fact the boys had experienced conflicts and war. Some FF members were impressed the boys could focus on their present situation, instead of brooding over the past. They had listened to horrible stories and had difficulties handling the information and knowing how to support the boys. All the FFs admired the boys for their courage and resilience when they heard stories about the situation in their home country and the long travel to Sweden. Some had, for example, tried to save other refugees during the journeys, even when they risked their own lives.

Discussion

This study on a group of families supporting UASC in Sweden gives an indication of how the local community can support UASC.

Motives

The FFs' motives to engage in the project were partly altruism, which also was the most common motives volunteers had in project using the Befriending concept (Behnia, 2007; Cassidy *et al.*, 2019). The FF also wanted to learn about the culture in the boys' home countries. During the interviews, they said their expectations were met.

Stretmo (2014) investigated the media reports on UASCs in Sweden and Norway and found them stereotypically described as "different", as vulnerable children or victims, or possible strategic migrants and not as the heterogenous group they are. However, the FFs described the differences between the context the boys came from and the Swedish context, not to be that big, except for the fact that the UASC have witnessed war and

conflict. One of the goals for the FFs to participate in the SC project was to get an understanding of the children, which they were not able to get from media.

The global image of migration has changed over time. Mass media has an important role of not only describing the migration but also shaping it (Rosen and Crafter, 2018). Before the so-called "migrant crisis" in 2015, the UASC were described as vulnerable children, but during the crisis, they became "a threat to the society." The refugees, in general, were described as "flooding" into Europe and the underlined messages were concepts like "othering" (Rosen and Crafter, 2018; Dempster, 2020).

Dempster (2020) found that countries that host many immigrants have been more positive towards migrants than those that host fewer. This was explained by their possibilities to communicate. During the so-called "migrant crisis", many inhabitants, for example, in Greece, felt they were overwhelmed by the big influx of migrants. They became negative to the migrants since they only met with them for a short period (Dempster, 2020).

In the present study, the FFs were positive towards migrants when they entered the project but were annoyed that the mass media gave such a negative picture of them. The FFs wanted to get to know UASC, directly from them, and wanted to learn more about their situation. In the European press, during the migration crisis, there were few connections between the individual stories on new arrivals and the stories from the countries they left. Scattered information was available to the public about the lives and cultures of the migrants (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017).

To prevent further prejudice about migrants, especially the UASC, projects like the FF project should encourage connection between migrants and the public during longer periods of time. The mass media should also work to better describe the reasons why UASCs are coming to Europe.

Befriending

To use befriending as a lens when analysing the interviews was useful. There are many similarities between the concept of befriending and the FF project such as the *organisations' responsibilities, the target groups, the form of contract and the negotiation of time.*

In a Befriending project an *organisation is responsible* for the recruitment, training and supervision and length of contacts with the volunteers (Behnia, 2007). The FFs were recruited by SC but, they did not have a clear job description and did not receive training or formal supervision from the organisation. Instead, the FF helped each other in a network which Bendler-Lindqvist (2004) recommended in earlier studies.

The target groups for befriending projects are individuals who face challenging situation in societies, for example individuals who experience poor mental health (Mead, 2010) or isolated (Cassidy *et al.*, 2019) or refugees in need of help with integration (Behnia, 2007). The target group in the FF project had all these traits. The UASC needed social support since the majority felt isolated, had traumatic experiences, did not speak the local language and were not familiar to the new society. At the same time, they were interested to have contact with the host population.

The difference was that in the FF project the befriendees were children. They were faced with stress connected to the asylum-seeking process and had difficulties in getting to know the Swedish society and being part of it.

Like the Befriending interventions the contacts in the FF project were not spontaneous. The local SC, together with the integration officer at the municipality, organised the matching between an UASC and a local family with common interests. However, in the FF, it was not only *one-to-one contacts* like in Befriending projects but worked in a similar way.

The different participants in the FFs had different roles in relation to the boys. The adults could give the boys practical and emotional support, advice and information about how the society works; meanwhile, the children could play with them and guide them into the youth culture in Sweden. Some boys needed psychosocial support, and the FFs could be the trustful person they needed.

In a befriending project, there is a *negotiation* about the contact between the befriender and the befriendees, including frequency of meeting and a time frame (Behnia, 2007). In the FF project it was not possible to set a time limit as it was not known for how long time the boys would stay in the community or in Sweden. However, he FFs were prepared to have contact both during working days and weekends.

More than befrienders – friend-families – a complementary role

The FFs in the project did not have a legal responsibility for the boys. However, the contacts between the FFs and the boys developed from being a befriending-like intervention into a deeper friend relation where the FFs felt they were ready to support the boys even if they were deported. This was illustrated when one of the boys called his FF "mum" or the deep concern a FF experienced during the disappearance of one of the boys from the group home. The complexity of the task to be befriender, and know how to handle difficult situations, has also been recognised in Befriending projects (Cassidy *et al.*, 2019).

The parents in the FF project, like befrienders in befriending projects in other countries (Scott *et al.*, 2019), experienced they gained both knowledge about the world, the asylum system in different countries and about children's vulnerability and need of support. They also reported feeling satisfied they had done something good for the boys. The results indicate that the FFs fulfilled the unaccompanied children's wish to have neutral trustful friends who were not part of the government's asylum reception system, and with whom they could relax and try to forget all the troubles and worries they had and feel a sense of belongingness. They showed deep engagement in the boys' lives and a strong affection for them since they realised how difficult their lives had been and continued to be. The FFs could also give the boys a family-like relationship and build the trustful relation Herz and Lalander (2019) stressed is important. However, more research is needed to clarify the outcomes of using Befriending interventions in the communities where befriending takes place (Balaam, 2015). More research is also needed to learn how the Befriending can be used to support UASC.

The FFs functioned as guides and links to authorities and the society. They supported the boys in the asylum process and could complement the duties of social workers and the staff who fulfilled their roles identified in the domains of cohesion, connection and coherence (Kohli, 2007). The FF's role, on the other hand, was not restricted by any authorities or regulations. They had the opportunity to be fellow human beings, instead of civil servants.

However, the FFs found it difficult to find a suitable way of communicating. Like a project in Norway, they found practical activities were the key to companionship with UASC (Johansen and Studsrød, 2019). The FFs also gave the boys information about how the Swedish society works and how an ordinary family live in Sweden, including gender issues, for example, how they are expected to act when they applied for a job or wanted to be friends with Swedish girls. This is important knowledge to have as part of the integration into the local culture, which you normally cannot learn through books (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020).

Implications for future projects

The FFs were disappointed because of the lack of support and information from the organisation, the authorities and staff at the group homes. The families needed

emotional preparedness for difficult situations like rejection of residence permit or disappearance of UASC, creating emotionally challenging situations for the family (Godani, 2016). This could have been prevented if situations like this had been discussed when the FFs entered the project. For future similar support projects, preparatory discussions, based on the experiences from this pilot project and other research with a focus on the local community's role in the support of UASC would probably benefit the discussion around support to unaccompanied children in general discussions with future FFs. In a befriending project, the volunteers are trained for their task and are supported by the organisations, which they were not in the studied FF project. The SC should meet the request from the FFs who asked for more knowledge and information around the children and the asylum process.

The study describes a pilot project in a small municipality in Sweden. The participating families described the support given to a group of boys. More studies are needed on Befriending projects to UASC, especially on support to girls.

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