

THE INTEGRATED MODEL OF FAMILY FOSTER CARE (MIAF): A study on the process evaluation of recruitment, assessment, and training of foster families in Portugal

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INTRODUCTION

- Compared to other European countries, family foster care (FFC) in Portugal is under-resourced and under-implemented (3.6% of children in foster care, compared to 96.4% in residential care; CASA Report, 2022). A shift to alternative care in a family environment is urgent and requires a combination of public policies and resources to promote high-quality practices that guarantee sustainable change.
- With the regulation of FFC in 2019 (DL no. 139/2019), which reinforces this alternative care as the preferred one for children up to the age of 6, institutions have begun to make efforts to effectively implement this measure. However, establishing a system of FFC is challenging. Among other reasons, it entails the need for specialized child welfare services to address the recruitment, training, and supervision of foster families, to provide adequate support to carers and children, and to ensure good matching decisions (Harlow, 2021). Indeed, failures in child welfare reforms are explained, at least in part, by accelerated changes relying on unprepared staff and evidence-practice gaps (Anghel et al., 2013).
- Therefore, the All4Children project (Baptista et al., 2024) focuses on the initial implementation phase of the Integrated Model of Family Foster Care (MIAF; ProChild Collaborative Laboratory & Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa). It is guided by implementation science frameworks (Albers et al., 2017), which share a stage-based approach, ascertaining that process and outcome evaluations, rooted in a theory of change, should precede effectiveness testing and full implementation.

OBJECTIVE

This study focuses on **process evaluation of MIAF** and aims to analyze the **fidelity** (the degree to which an intervention was implemented as it was prescribed in the original protocol), **feasibility** (the extent to which a new model can be successfully used within a given setting), and **acceptability** (the perception among stakeholders that an intervention model is agreeable, or satisfactory) of MIAF’s first key-processes (Awareness raising and foster families’ recruitment; and Pre-service training), from the foster families’ perspective.

METHOD

- 62 foster families’ applicants that participated in an informative session about FFC organized by one of the four Portuguese agencies applying MIAF and 33 foster families' applicants who completed the pre-service training of MIAF.
- Foster families’ applicants were invited to complete fidelity and feasibility forms after two key-process of MIAF: 1) awareness raising and foster families’ recruitment; and 2) pre-service training
- The Conceptual Framework for Implementation Outcomes (Proctor et al., 2009) guided the data collection and analysis, and the results will be organized into specific implementation outcomes (Proctor et al., 2011)

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Awareness raising and foster families’ recruitment

Figure 1.

Strategies of foster family care awareness in MIAF’s implementation.

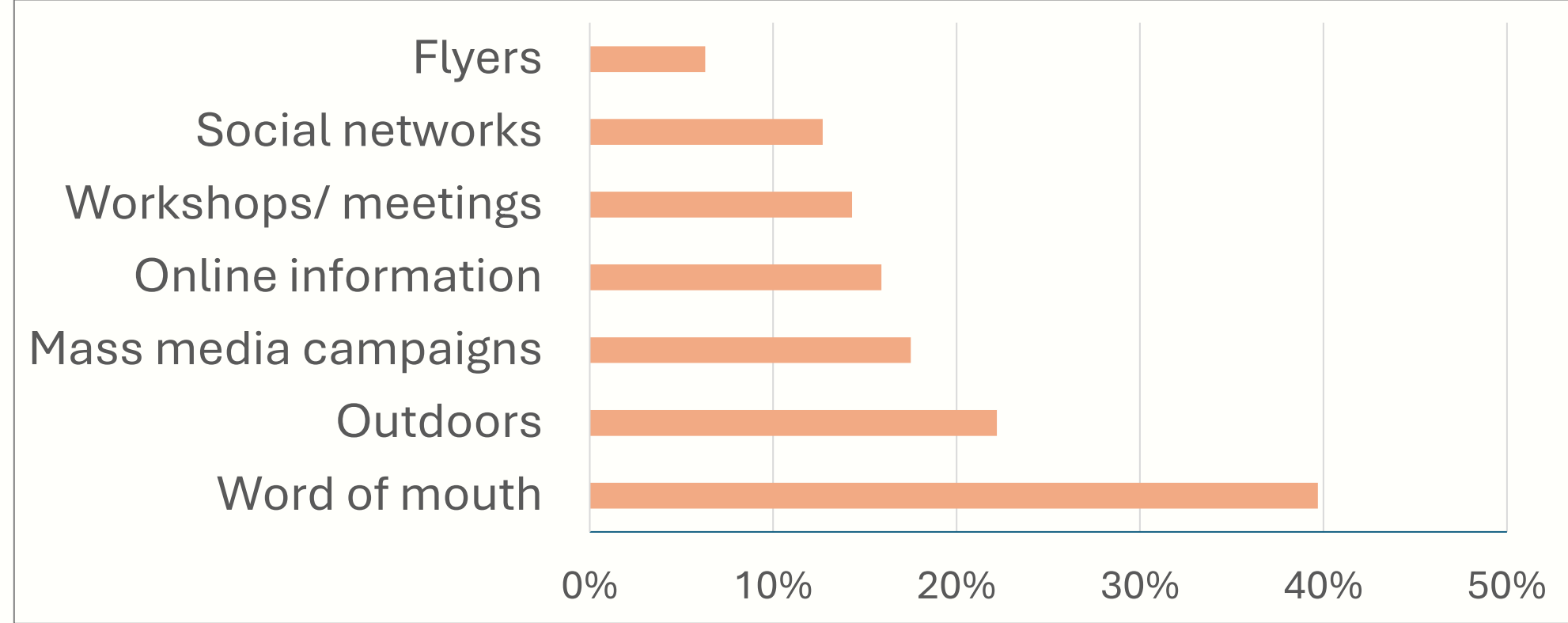


Table 1.

Descriptives of fidelity, acceptability and feasibility of MIAF’s key-process of awareness raising and foster families’ recruitment (n = 62).

Process evaluation	M (SD)	Range
Fidelity	2.94 (0.25)	2.00 – 3.00
Acceptability	4.40 (0.53)	3.00 – 5.00
Feasibility	4.30 (0.60)	2.00 – 5.00

- “Word of mouth” as the main strategy of awareness about FFC and foster families’ recruitment
- High fidelity of MIAF’s implementation regarding the information available to potential foster families
- High acceptability and feasibility of MIAF’s key-process of awareness raising and foster families’ recruitment from the foster families’ perspective

Pre-service training

Table 2.

Descriptives of fidelity, acceptability and feasibility of MIAF’s pre-service training (n = 33).

Process evaluation	M (SD)	Range
Fidelity	2.91 (0.12)	2.5 – 3.00
Acceptability	4.26 (0.51)	3.29 – 5.00
Feasibility	4.23 (0.56)	3.23 – 5.00

- High fidelity of MIAF’s implementation regarding pre-service training
- High acceptability and feasibility of MIAF’s key-process of pre-service training from the foster families’ perspective
- Less satisfaction with the depth of content such as children characteristics and needs (12.1%), the integration in FFC (12.9%), relationship with the biological family (12.9%), and FFC length and child’s transition to a permanent context (18.2%)
- Less acceptability of the pre-service training format (27.3%) and schedule (18.2%)

DISCUSSION

- Preliminary results support the fidelity, acceptability and feasibility of the MIAF’s first key-processes, namely awareness raising and foster families’ recruitment, and pre-service training, from the perspective of the foster families’ applicants.
- Future studies will be focused on other stakeholders’ perspective, namely professionals applying MIAF.
- These first MIAF’s key-processes may add in providing clear and relevant information dissemination about the foster care system, meeting the needs previously identified in the portuguese FFC (Anjos et al., 2023; Negrão et al., 2019).