

## Psychological Characteristics of Adolescents Orphans with Different Experience of Living in a Family

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### ABSTRACT

The complexity of settling adolescents-orphans in foster families and significant number of break-downs in these families are the problems which determine the relevance of current research. Many adolescent orphans get in social institutions repeatedly, because their psychological features lead to difficulties that their foster parents are unable to cope with. These features hereby need to be thoroughly studied. This article presents the study of psychological features of adolescents with different experiences of living in a family. Research complex of 17 psycho-diagnostic methods allowed to reveal specific differences in psychology of adolescents-orphans without experience of living in a family, compared with adolescents who live in orphan institutions, but have the experience of living in a family and with adolescents living in a family since their birth. It was found that family deprivation violates psychological development of adolescents. The violation manifests itself in the specificity of their emotional intelligence and regulatory functions, reduction of social intelligence and level of sociability, as well as in specific self-image (negative self-attitude, uncertainty, distrust of the world, particular attitude to the future and the prospects of life, etc.) and perception of the other (distorted attitude towards the family and its members, negative view of parent-child relationship and child functions, etc.). The results obtained are of interest for children psychologists and social workers.

### KEYWORDS

Adolescents, orphans, psychological characteristics, family deprivation

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## Introduction

Scientific studies of the orphan hood began in the XVIII century and continue to the present day. It was found that children who have undergone family deprivation, have a variety of negative features. According to studies, these children and adolescents develop a number of negative characteristics: slow rate of mental development (Mukhamedrakhimov, 2006), low IQ (Bardyshevskaya & Lebedinsky, 2003), emotional and regulatory disorders

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(Koltinova, 2013), instable and inadequate self-esteem (Shvets, 2011; Karnaukh, 2006), anxiety and hostility to adults and low sociometric status in the group of peers (Karnaukh, 2006), poor skills of self-control (Mikhailova, 2004; Chuprova, 2007; Shvets, 2011) and of socially acceptable behavior (Muhamedrahimov et al., 2008), distorted identity (Savkova, 2013) and family image (Shubina, 2013; Shulga & Tatarenko, 2013).

Mental and psychophysiological status of children in institutions for orphans and children left without parental care is characterized by a variety of pathologies (Kozlovskaya, 2013; Proselkova, 2013), poor "self-concept" (Shvets, 2011), passive life position and distorted life perspective (Zhiltsova, 2014). Lack of experience of family life at an early age has a destructive influence on the development of emotional sphere (Mikhailova, 2004; Mukhamedrahimov, 2006; Prikhozhan & Tolstykh, 2005; Nelson et al., 2007; Shulga, 2013), intellect (Tottenham et al., 2011; Gee et al., 2013) and speech (Proselkova, 2013), ability to establish trustful relationships with others (Kozlovskaya, 2013; Chuprova, 2007; Nelson et al., 2007), determines behavioral and psychosomatic problems (Bardyshevskaya & Lebedinsky, 2003; Ivanov et al., 2016).

Psychologists also notice communication disorders and impaired mental function of orphans, attribute neuropsychological origins to their affective deficiency (Gee et al., 2013; Tottenham et al., 2011), mark a wide range of mental health disorders (Nelson et al., 2007). Psychophysiological studies run by N. Tottenham et al. (2011) show that traumatic childhood events continue to influence the development of the brain of an adolescent, manifesting themselves in acute depressive episodes (Fetiskin et al., 2002)

Our review shows that, in spite of a significant number of studies, psychology of adolescent orphans is still poorly understood. In particular, there have not been integrated, comprehensive study of adolescent with no experience of living in a family. Present study, run in 2010-2012 on the sample of Russian adolescents, fills the existing gaps.

## Materials and methods

### Research methods

Research data included the results of a range of tests, including 17 diagnostic instruments with different purposes. We studied two groups of variables, allowing fully disclose psychological features of orphan adolescents who have never lived in the family (Sobchik, 1990).

#### *Individual psychological features:*

— masculinity, femininity ("MIF" by T.L. Bessonova & N.V. Dvoryanchikov (1998));

— aggressiveness and hostility (A. Buss, A. Durkey, modification by A.A. Hwang, Y.A. Zaitsev & Y.A. Kuznetsova (2005));

— feelings of guilt, fear, attitude towards the past, future, life goals, self-perception ("Sentence completion test" Sacks-Sydney, modification by B.M. Behterev (1969));

— motivation of affiliation (A. Mehrabian, modification by M.Sh. Magomed-Eminova (1988))

- affective features ("Piktogram" A.R. Luria, S.V. Longinova & S.Y. Rubinstein (1972));
- accentuation of personality (K. Leonhard & G. Shmishek (1970));
- attitudes (Potemkina, 1989);
- self-esteem and level of aspiration (T.V. Dembo, S.Y. Rubinstein, modified by A.M. Prikhozhan (1988));
- character traits (R. Giles (1959));
- latent and pathological manifestations of personality ("House-tree-person" G. Buk (1948))
- individual time perspective (Zazzo & Kunitsyna, 2001);
- Self-evaluation of life productivity ("Evaluation of quinquenniums of the life", E.I. Golovakha & A.A. Kronik (1984)).
- Social relations and social behavior:*
  - self-concept, ideal self, relationship in a group (Leary, Leforz & Sazek, 1954)
  - predominant type of relationship, type of individual response to conflict situations and level of social adequacy (Giles, 1959);
  - anxiety in parent-child relationship and ways to protect against it ("CAT" N. And C. Bellac (1949));
  - attitude towards the family, to one's or opposite gender, to friends, father, mother, social adult ("Sentence completion test" Sacks-Sydney modification by B.M. Behterev (1969); "Pictogram" A.R. Luria, S.V. Longinov & S.J. Rubinstein (1972));
  - interpersonal relationships («REP» modification by A.G. Lidars, 2006; E.F. Bazhin & A.M. Etkind (1985));
  - social intelligence (Guilford, 1951).

Statistical processing of the results was carried out using the method of comparison by G. Scheffe (1980).

### **Research base**

All subjects were divided into three groups:

- Group 1 (experimental) – 17 adolescents-orphans without any experience of living in a family;
- Group 2 – 49 adolescents having an experience of family life and brought up in the conditions of institutionalization since the age of 3-7;
- Group 3 – 56 adolescents who are brought up in a family since their birth.

Groups 2 and 3 served as control groups and their results were compared with the experimental Group.

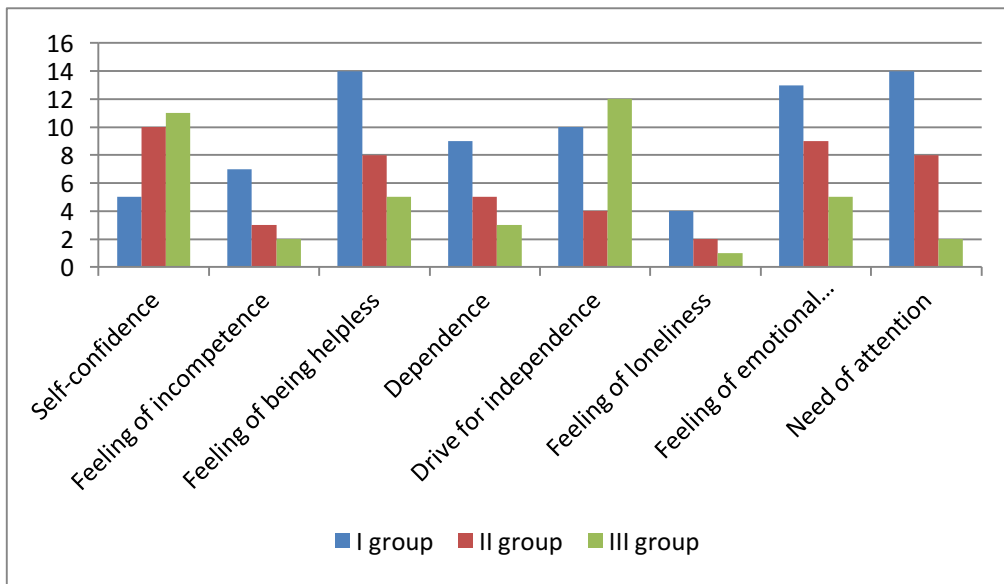
### **Results**

Comparative analysis of psychological characteristics of adolescents from experimental and control Groups has revealed that there are significant differences between them.

Adolescents in Group 1 have expressed strong need for protection and attention. They feel lack of warmth, helplessness, dependence, defectiveness,

loneliness and insecurity. They rarely show feminine features ( $p = 0.005$ ), but more frequently experience fear, anxiety, oppression, internal stress and fear of rejection, in comparison with other Groups. Group 1 demonstrated the highest degree of hostility and aggressiveness ( $p = 0.022$ ) and strong sense of guilt ( $p = 0.000$ ). Many of subjects in Group 1 appeared to have exalted accentuation and low level of curiosity ( $p = 0.015$ ).

Group 1 also expresses the most negative attitude towards their own future, comparing to the results of control groups. Events that fill the time perspective of adolescents with no experience of life in a family are often associated with short time span, do not have personal value, indicate their infantile goals and sometimes their negative emotional state. Thoughts of death are frequent in their life perspective, as well as their general passiveness, dependent attitudes, and neutral attitude to life goals.



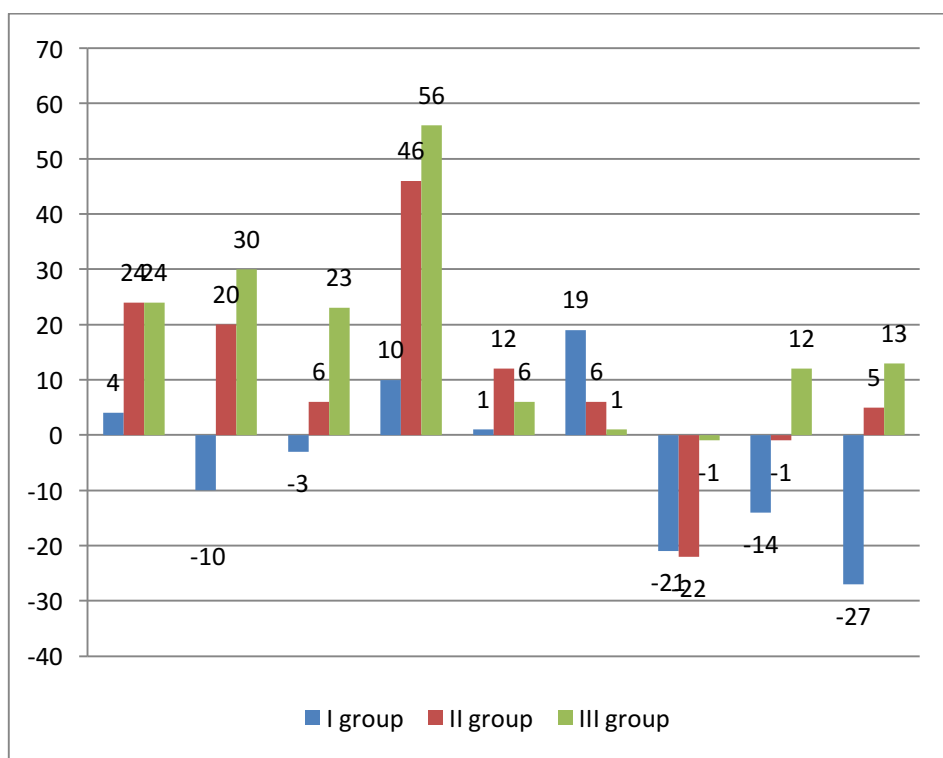
**Figure 1.** Individual psychological characteristics of adolescents with different experience of living in a family (average value)

Adolescents in Group 2 tend to see themselves as more masculine. They demonstrate higher level of confidence in comparison to experimental group. Group 2 subjects tend to show faint desire for independence. They experience intense fear of rejection, strong sense of guilt and tendency to physical aggression. Adolescents-orphans who have experience of life in a family are suspicious and touchy. Their evaluation of their own character, abilities and appearances is heightened, at the same time they show high level of aspirations, foremost in regard to their abilities and appearances.

Group 2 subjects have positive attitude towards the future, which lacks criticism; their perception of life perspective is inadequate. Adolescents of Group 2 set themselves constructive goals and strive for freedom. Research revealed statistically significant differences between them and experimental group regarding such parameters as "attitude to the future" ( $p = 0.025$ ) and "life goals"

( $p = 0.016$ ). Adolescents with the experience of living in a family see their future in a more positive way than adolescents without family experience. Group 2 subjects are thinking about such ways to achieve their goals that assume a proactive life position and self-development. Main common features of all orphaned adolescents (Groups 1 and 2) are their mostly unrealistic life goals and uncritical attitude towards their ability to achieve these goals.

Adolescents of Group 3 are confident, they show the most positive self-attitude ( $p = 0.017$ ) and stronger desire for independence. They are characterized by realistic level of aspirations and relatively low level of affiliation and fear of rejection when compared with their peers who live in institutions. Their profile of self-esteem is usually well-differentiated, they develop profound understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Family adolescents show more constructive and realistic judgments in goal setting compared to Groups 1 and 2. This allows to create a more favorable prognosis of their social and psychological development.



**Figure 2.** Characteristics of social relationships of adolescents with different experience of living in a family (average value)

Analysis of social relations demonstrated that Group 1 is characterized by high level of dependent relationship to other people, low dominance level, unclear attitude to sexual sphere, to family as a whole and its members (mother, father, parent couple, siblings, grandparents), negative view of parent-child relationship and child functions, strong attitude to social adults (teachers and other employees of organizations for orphans and children left without parental care), the lowest level of complexity of the system of interpersonal relations. Adolescents who were brought up in institutions have low levels of sociability,

tend to easily come into conflicts and show passive-type response to conflict social situations. Adolescents-orphans who have never lived in a family showed the lowest results in terms of social intelligence and understanding of behavior and its consequences (difference between Groups 1 and 3 appears at 0.1% error level).

Adolescents in Group 2 are more friendly towards other people compared with Group 1. They are open to communicate with extended family members (including grandparents) and attached to their siblings. Their system of interpersonal relationships is complex. This group demonstrated the highest level of social adequacy and neutral type of response to conflicts.

Group 3 tends to demonstrate dominant behavior and authoritarian attitude towards others. Compared with adolescents in Groups 1 and 2, they show more positive attitude towards men and women, and are more focused on their peers. At the same time young people who are brought up in a family since their birth, tend to react actively, aggressively to most conflict situations, neutrally to some of them and passively – in exceptional cases. Adolescents in a family develop high level of verbal expression, of social intelligence in general and, in particular, of understanding behavior and its consequences.

## Discussion

Negative and aloof self-perception in experimental group can result from family deprivation, which can have negative impact on formation of self-image. Social situation of development in institutions for orphans (deficit of individual attention, low sensitivity and responsiveness of social adults, lack of personal space, etc.) is another possible cause of self-perception deficit in Group 1.

Self-doubt can be attributed to the absence of adequate response to child's need in deep, trustful relationship with close adult at all stages of development. Constant frustration leads to a perception of the world as unpredictable and dangerous, thus the basis for confidence cannot be created.

Adolescents who are brought up in institutions, but have the experience of living in a family, are more confident than family adolescents. These latter tend to reflect more about their abilities, are guided by the opinion of the reference group in forming attitudes to themselves and are ready to adequately assess the level of their capabilities. High level of self-confidence among adolescents of Group 2 may be a defense mechanism. Their self-esteem and level of aspiration are overestimated. The myth of limitlessness of its capabilities is very common among adolescents in institutions. Accordingly, the nature of self-confidence among adolescents growing up in a family since their birth, and those who have undergone family deprivation, can be different.

Adolescents-orphans who had no experience of life in the family have a strong need to be protected more than others. This feature may impact negatively on the formation of their personal autonomy. Low desire for independence of these subjects leads to difficulties with their distinction of themselves from the society, with personal maturation and sense of maturity.

Adolescents who are brought up in institutions since their birth meet with family deprivation, which leads to low level of feminine features in this group. If an adult is sensitive and responds adequately to infant's signals, the development of femininity occurs naturally through imitation. Stable relationship with an adult, his emotional connection to the child help the latter to establish trust in the world and to learn to express feminine features (gentleness, tenderness,

delicacy, sincerity, etc.). Social situation of development for adolescents, who are deprived of parental care throughout life, did not involve any close adult in sensitive periods of development. They did not form any emotional connections with adults, therefore their need for security was not satisfied. They needed to cultivate masculine features, and their feminine features could be considered by the body as secondary, unnecessary and even unsafe to express.

Lack of acceptance by the parents, experience of rejection lead to the fact that the child perceives other people as opposed to him, feels anxiety when coming into contact, is afraid of being rejected. This experience extends to the others and dictates a cautious attitude towards them. At the same time child's commitment to people continues to be strong, as the child is tempted to compensate for his inner deficit. His desire is often blocked by the fear that once again leads to frustration. Situation of development in a family does not help to satisfy the need for acceptance and to overcome the fear of rejection due to dissociation of a group of children and blurred boundaries of communication. Adolescents who have never lived in a family are more aggressive than others, which may be a response to the danger and instability of their surroundings. Adolescents who live in institutions since their birth are more apt to start destructive conflicts and are less able to cooperate with others. Noting increased level of hostility in adolescents with no experience of life in the family, we mean that they are more inclined to attribute negative qualities to other objects and phenomena due to the unavailability of intimate relationship with an adult. This is a result of their frustrated social needs, of deficient basic trust in the world.

Adolescents with different experiences of life in the family experience guilt in different forms. Adolescents with total family deprivation are apt to self-incrimination. Those who had the experience of family life manifest underlying traumatic experience. "Family" adolescents mostly feel guilt on the superficial level.

Analysis of self-esteem and level of aspiration shows inadequate overvaluation of these criteria in Group 2. Little experience of life in the family made this group of adolescents reckon themselves as capable, beautiful, etc. Their defense mechanisms help them to ignore objective information.

"Family" adolescents are more curious than adolescents who live in institutions for orphans and children left without parental care since their birth. The lack of basic trust in the world as the achievement of infancy can lead to the perception of the world as threatening. Desire to understand it thus decreases.

In our opinion, differences in "time perspective" between the groups are a direct consequence of the presence or absence of family deprivation. Segregative education principle, which is common in institutions for orphans, affects child's ability of holistic life perception, creating fragmentary view. Access to information about children in institutions is closed. Adolescents may not know their own background. Their view of themselves and of their future prospects is limited. Family adolescents can be more constructive and realistic in goal setting, which creates a more favorable prognosis of their social and psychological development.

Analysis of social relations and of attitude to others shows that adolescents who have experience of living in a family tend to dominate, unlike their family-deprived peers. Adolescents in Group 2 and 3 express higher levels of self-confidence, desire for independence, sense of security and lower need for



protection. This result may be associated with their tendency to lead and dominate. Low degree of dominance in Group 1 is due to self-doubt, dependent attitude to others, sense of helplessness – all the features formed during the early periods of development in the absence of a close adult.

"Family" adolescents treat men better than those having little experience of life in the family. Most children from institutions for orphans and children left without parental care who used to live in dysfunctional families (Group 2) were often abused by a man. Their image of masculinity became filled with negative characteristics and influenced their attitude towards the men. Another possible cause is a tendency to idealize the closest adult, which is often the mother. Respectively, most traumatic experiences of life in biological family, are attributed to the father, and then are extended to men in general.

Adolescents who are brought up in institutions show a negative attitude towards the father as compared with their peers who are brought up in the family. In most cases their experience of living in a family and of parent-child relationships was negative and disharmonious. Many adolescents were abused by their parents, and while the image of mother is often idealized, the image of the father carries all the negative memories about the family. Adolescents share their impressions with peers who do not have personal experience with their fathers. Another possible explanation is that most adults who surround adolescents in institution are female. Thus an idea of mother is associated with a woman in general and becomes more understandable. Teachers fill it with different characteristics, which adolescents absorb. Adolescents who form attachment to social adults, thus replacing mother figure, stand out in the group with no experience of family life. Adolescents who used to live in a family tend to better understand parental (especially maternal) roles and family functions. They earn this knowledge in direct communication, which helps to form personal attitude to the mother. Despite the fact that her image is often distorted (idealized, obscured), it exists in adolescent's mind and is filled with personal meaning. Its emotional content appears to be mostly negative and unrealistic, compared with adolescents who are brought up in a family, but it is more positive than that of orphans from birth.

Adolescents who have the experience of living in a family, regard sexual life more constructively than adolescents who live in institutions all their lives. The latter see this topic negatively; they understand sex as something associated with violence or obscenity. Based on our experience of practical work with adolescents and graduates of institutions for orphans, we can assume that the manifestations of sexual activity with which they had encountered directly (either personally or as a witness), were associated with physical or psychological violence.

The vacuum caused by family deprivation seeks to be filled with substitute figures. A child of early age can form an attachment to the group of peers or to adults available (Mikhaylova, 2004). This mechanism works in early school years as well (Chuprova, 2007). Family-deprived adolescent is primarily focused on social adult who begins to play a particularly important role, replacing parent in adolescent's imagination. Deprived adolescents highly appreciate care and attention of social adult, as for many of them it is the only way to compensate for their deficit. Group 1 subjects choose one adult and try to establish special relationship with him. Adolescents who are brought up in the conditions of the



institutionalization create an image of mother or father relying on the experience of social adult.

Adolescents who have experience of living in a family, have more positive attitude toward siblings than those who live in institutions since their birth. If siblings are in institution for orphans from the very beginning, they have almost no experience of close communication. Their family feelings need special work to come into existence. In Group 2 sibling relationships existed during the period of family life, but they may weaken or even disappear in institution.

Attitude towards extended family in Group 3 is significantly more positive than in Group 1. Creating an understanding of extended family is not a priority in most psychological and educational programs. It is clear that relations with close adult, which may be grandmother and grandfather, are very important. But the public mainly refers to the importance of relations with mother. Adolescents of Group 2 often (in comparison with Group 3) name fairy-tale characters among the most important figures, filling the social vacuum. Children from orphan institutions who have experience of living in a family, form a more complex system of relationships than those who lived in institution since their birth.

There is a difference between aloofness of adolescents who are brought up in a family, and of those who have undergone total family deprivation. Adolescents from institutions, having no experience of living in a family, are deprived of the opportunity to form stable and permanent relationship with an adult, which leads to the formation of basic mistrust of the world, of negative self-attitude, of alienation, and insularity in adulthood. At the same time, "family" adolescents shut themselves off from society, become more withdrawn in result of natural development of self-awareness and reflection.

Analysis of social intelligence revealed the highest rates in the group of adolescents who are brought up in the family. The ability to focus on the feelings, thoughts and intentions of other person in communication, taking into account actual context, is decreased in the group of family-deprived adolescents, which seriously hampers their ability to anticipate others' actions. Understanding the rules and role models that regulate human relationships, is deficit in this group of adolescents. This is the cause for their mistakes (including illegal activities), getting into conflict and dangerous situations as they have poor view of the results of their behavior. They find it difficult to understand common norms and rules of behavior.

Adolescents without family experience also showed low level of understanding of speech expression. They are not sensitive to nuances of human relationships, which interferes with their understanding of what people say to each other in particular situation or specific relationship. They often make mistakes while interpreting other person's words. As a result they feel unreasonably offended and once again become convinced that other people are threatening them. All family-deprived adolescents are experiencing difficulties in analyzing interpersonal interactions and, consequently, in adaptation to personal relationships (family, business, friendship).

Infancy is the most sensitive period for active development of social intelligence. Parental care is considered a necessary condition for such a development. In the absence of a close adult, who "brings life" to the child, social development is significantly inhibited.

## Conclusions

The main conclusion to be drawn from our research is that family deprivation affects *all levels* of child's mind – from deep unconscious layers (fear, guilt, anxiety) to self-consciousness (self-perception, self-attitude, self-acceptance, self-image in the future) and social relations (attitude towards men, women, family and its members, perception and understanding of others). In this regard, we recommend following methods of work for employees of institutions who work directly with orphans.

Firstly, to use *all methods of child support in stressful situations*: discuss his situation, his positive resources and possible ways of coping with it; work with fears, constructive reaction to aggressive behavior, all the ways to harmonize child's emotional state, taking the position of help to the child, etc. 3. Special support is required during child's adaptation period to the institution for orphans (greeting ritual, individual space, tolerant and consistent attitude, understanding the causes of inappropriate behavior and effective methods of correction).

Second, *talk with an adolescent about all the issues that he or she is concerned about*. In particular, adolescents start thinking about their future, which depends essentially on their past. It is important to discuss past and present of an adolescent, to help in their understanding and acceptance, to participate in building future prospects.

Third, *use the opportunities of group leisure activities* (role plays, group discussions, work through video, etc.) as the means to improve social status of the adolescents, to develop social intelligence, adequate ways of social interaction, positive attitude toward themselves and toward various groups of people.

Fourth, *carry out information work with a teenager*. If psychologists of the institution conduct psychodiagnostics of children, its results should be given not only to the employees but also to the subjects. It is important to provide adolescents with the information about their background from birth to the present time. Knowing their own psychological features, their strengths and weaknesses, their past and present are essential elements for the formation of self-concept.

Fifth, *include adolescents in work with younger children, contribute to formation and development of sibling relationships* (joint productive activity, joint achievements, emphasizing the value of sibling relationships and sibling position, teaching the roles and responsibilities to each other). Communication with younger children develops interaction skills and social intelligence of adolescent, creates sense of responsibility, and also removes the negative effect of being in a state institution for orphans.

Sixth, *prepare adolescent to going to foster family*: discuss the importance of family and deep, trustful relationship, prepare to meet with the candidates, join activities with them, guest mode on weekends and holidays, gradual and consistent contacts.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

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