



Defining and strengthening child well-being in child protection



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ABSTRACT

Although the goals of safety and permanency for children continue as critically important mandates in child protection, the field has witnessed an increased focus on child well-being in recent years. Whereas safety and permanency have been well operationalized, child well-being appears to be a much more complex and daunting concept to define and measure. Current federal guidelines require child protective agencies to improve outcomes in the area of child well-being, and although federal regulations offer some direction on interpreting this concept, the definition and operationalization remain vague. As leaders in the field have attempted to provide language by which to talk about and measure child well-being, a number of key frameworks have emerged. In this paper, we present a conceptual map that provides a visual overlay of these existing frameworks that can help guide child protection policy-makers, administrators, and practitioners toward a fuller understanding of the complexities of child well-being. While this conversation on child well-being is not new, this paper aims to add to the national discussion and deepen the understanding and conceptualization of child wellbeing within the context of child protection.

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1. Introduction

Since its recognition as a professional field of practice, child protection has experienced an ongoing evolution and refinement of policy and practice that has led to the current focus on child safety, permanency and well-being. In the 1970s, the national focus in child protection was centered primarily on child safety. This was evidenced by the landmark legislation of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1976, which marked the first national policy to protect children from abuse and neglect from their caregivers. This focus on safety was an important first step in acknowledging child abuse and neglect as a social issue, rather than a private family matter. Over the next several decades, policy-makers and experts became concerned about children lingering in out-of-home care without a permanent home. Several policies, beginning in the 1980s, attempted to address the concerns around permanency by increasing resources to promote adoption and family reunification, and by shortening mandated timelines by which to achieve permanency, including the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Family Preservation and Family Support of 1993, and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.

Although the goals of safety and permanency for children continue as critically important mandates in child protection, the field has witnessed an increased focus on child well-being in recent years (Mason, 2012). This was partly driven by concern that even when

children were kept safe from harm and were in a permanent and stable home, a large number of children who had come to the attention of child protection were not doing well across many domains of functioning, raising questions about their overall well-being (Samuels, 2012). Whereas safety and permanency have been defined and operationalized in child protection, child well-being appears to be a much more complex and daunting concept to define and measure. Although federal guidelines offer some guidance on defining and interpreting child well-being in child protection, the definition remains vague in the field. A search of the child protection and the broader child welfare literature quickly reveals that the term “child well-being” is used widely, but with varied and inconsistent meanings (Pollard & Lee, 2003).

This emerging discussion of child well-being as it relates to child safety, mirrors an on-going tension in the field about how to characterize the work of child protection. There are deeply held beliefs about what the focus of the field's efforts should be and even about what the field should call its services, with an on-going pendulum swing, from child protection to child welfare, and back again (Lindsey, 1994). This has also been characterized as a dichotomy between the focus on child protection/child safety versus a focus on family preservation. The term “child protective services” connotes types of front-end interventions that focus on mandated reporting of suspected maltreatment and the investigative response of the public agency, as well as services related to out-of-home placement such as foster care. Lindsey (1994) suggests that mandatory reporting in the 1970s and 1980s caused the child welfare system to shift to a child protection system, in which limited resources were primarily directed to ensuring the physical safety of children, oftentimes through removing children from their families

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and placing them in foster care. This also came at the expense of family supports. For purposes of this paper, we will however use the term “child protection,” acknowledging that the growing focus on child well-being suggests an expanded mandate for the field; one that includes but also goes beyond a focus on child safety and permanency with the aim of ensuring *holistic* outcomes of well-being for children.

As leaders in the field have attempted to provide language by which to talk about and measure child well-being, a number of key frameworks have emerged. This paper aims to add to the national discussion, and deepen the understanding and conceptualization of child well-being within the context of child protection. While this conversation is not new to the field, it is our hope that the information presented in this paper will help bring about a more purposeful discussion within the field for conceptualizing and developing resources to better attend to the goal of child well-being in the child protection system.

In this paper, we outline and compare several current frameworks of child well-being, including (1) the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) framework; (2) the recent *Well-being Framework* outlined by the Administration for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF); (3) the *Framework for Well-being for Older Youth in Foster Care* (OYFC) by the Foster Care Work Group; (4) the University of Minnesota Center for Spirituality and Healing’s (CSH) *Well-being Model*; and (5) a framework of well-being viewed through the lens of a Relational Worldview (RVW) developed by the National Indian Child Welfare Association. While many well-being frameworks exist (e.g., [Central Michigan University, College of Medicine. \(N.D.\)](#); [Vanderbilt University & Wellness Center, 2013](#)), these five frameworks were chosen based on applicability to children and adolescents served by child protection and inclusion of a multi-faceted or holistic perspective of child well-being. In addition to well-being frameworks, there are other related resources such as the Youth Thrive Framework developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy ([Harper Brown, 2014](#)). This framework was not selected for this analysis, as it focuses more on outlining promotive and protective factors, rather than defining well-being; however we do include this framework in our final section that discusses the implications for child welfare policies and practices.

In this paper, we present a conceptual map that provides a visual overlay of these five existing well-being frameworks that can help guide child protection policy-makers, administrators, and practitioners toward a fuller understanding of the complexities of defining child well-being for use in child protection. As current federal guidelines require agencies to improve outcomes in the area of child well-being, it is essential to have a firmer foundation of understanding of how to conceptualize child well-being in the field of child protection. This paper aims to move this dialogue forward.

2. Defining child well-being

As child protection policy and practice begin to shift to more fully support child well-being, developing a shared understanding and definition of this concept is critically important. To date, there is no shared agreement in the field as to how to define child well-being. Without the ability to define child well-being, the field is limited in its ability to promote child well-being and to evaluate if practices are achieving this goal. Most definitions of child well-being underscore the complexity of this concept, and include indicators that consider the whole child and cross several domains of overall life quality and functioning including: physical, mental and behavioral health; social and emotional health; safety and the physical environment; economic security; and academic and intellectual outcomes ([Federal Interagency Forum on Child & Family Statistics, 2010](#); [Lou, Anthony, Stone, Vu, & Austin, 2008](#)). Before we outline several key frameworks, we will first provide some theoretical context for understanding child well-being.

3. Theoretical context for understanding well-being

One of the most well-known and widely referenced humanistic theories in human development and well-being is Maslow’s hierarchy of needs ([Maslow, 1943](#)). Maslow outlines stages of growth, or patterns of human motivation, that are laid out in a linear fashion (in the now classic pyramid of needs). The general notion is that people’s basic needs (also called “deficiency needs”) must be met before they can address higher-order needs (or “growth” needs). The hierarchy of needs begins with *Physiological* at the foundation of the pyramid, which refers to fundamental basic bodily needs of breathing air, food, water, and shelter ([Maslow, 1943](#)). *Safety* is the next level in the hierarchy; it refers to physical health and safety, as well as economic or financial security. *Love and belongingness* come next in the hierarchy; this level is comprised of relationships with family and friends and includes a sense of connection. *Self-esteem* is the next level in the hierarchy and includes the desire of humans to feel respected and have a sense of accomplishment. The final level in the hierarchy of need is *Self-actualization*, which refers to the stage in life when people have reached their full potential and are moral and creative beings ([Maslow, 1943](#)).

In some ways, the focus on safety first, then permanence and well-being in child protection systems mirrors Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Even though Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a widely held and accepted theory, little research has been done to empirically test the theory; this is particularly true within discourse about child development and child well-being ([Noltemeyer, Bush, Patton, & Bergen, 2012](#)). One study, however, found that meeting the health and safety needs of children and improving belongingness has a positive impact on growth needs such as school functioning and academic growth ([Noltemeyer et al., 2012](#)). Others have critiqued the child protection system as focusing too heavily on the deficiency needs of safety and permanency and not enough on growth needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization, including critiques from those who have been in the foster care system ([Braxton & Krajewski-Jaime, 2011](#)).

Alongside Maslow, others have been influenced by Adlerian individualistic approaches to human development, including more recent efforts to apply this thinking to defining wellness ([Myers & Sweeney, 2005](#)). First developed as the *Wheel of Wellness*, [Myers and Sweeney \(2005\)](#) later modified this to become the *Indivisible Self* model of wellness, which was based on Adler’s concepts of humanistic psychology and major life tasks of work, love and friendship ([Adler, 1954](#)). The *Indivisible Self Wellness Model* includes the following five main factors which comprise the “indivisible” self: the *Essential Self*, *Social Self*, *Creative Self*, *Physical Self* and *Coping Self*, all within the local, institutional, global and chronometrical (lifespan) contexts ([Myers & Sweeney, 2005](#)). The essential self includes spirituality and identity; the social self is friendship and love; the creative self includes emotional and thinking processes; the physical self includes exercise and nutrition; and the coping self includes stress management and a sense of self-worth ([Myers & Sweeney, 2005](#)). Although both Adler and Maslow focused on purposiveness and motivation of becoming a better self, one unique feature of the *Indivisible Self* model, is that human behavior is only understood through holism, as both the whole and the parts, as opposed to Maslow’s more linear framework of higher order of needs ([Myers & Sweeney, 2005](#)). The *Indivisible Self* model has also been tested, and researchers have found support for these concepts related to holism ([Hattie, Myers, & Sweeney, 2004](#)).

Although the human development frameworks outlined here have been widely accepted within the field of psychology, child protection scholars are also drawing from other theories in defining well-being. Many scholars agree that child well-being must be understood in a developmental context, as childhood is not static but rather a series of developmental stages, each with its own tasks and milestones, including the following stages: infancy, toddlerhood and early childhood, later childhood, adolescence, and the transition into adulthood ([Erikson & Erikson, 1998](#); [Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001](#)). Scholars

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