



# Participatory discourse: Engagement in the context of child protection assessment practices from the perspectives of child protection workers, parents and children



Ere Arbeiter<sup>a</sup>, Karmen Toros<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Valga municipality, Valga Linnavalitsus, Puiestee 8, 68203 Valga, Estonia

<sup>b</sup> Tallinn University, Narva mnt 25, 10120 Tallinn, Estonia

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This article describes empirical results of the views of child protection workers, parents and children along different dimensions including interpretation of engagement, approaches with families in the engagement process, collaboration and relationship, barriers and factors promoting engagement.

**Method:** A qualitative study was undertaken of a sample of eleven child protection workers, eleven parents and eleven children in one county in South-Estonia. The study explored the participants' experiences and perspectives of the engagement, within the context of assessment in child protection practice, through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

**Results:** Results indicate that child protection workers demonstrate an over-reliance on expert- and deficit-based approaches, indicating a requirement for a focus on traditional social work assessment, concentrating on problems, and more investigative, coercive, and judgement-focused approaches. Both workers and parents valued the quality of relationships, emphasising trust, dialogue and support as important elements of engagement. According to children, they were not always considered as a subject in the assessment process, including their needs as the primary focus; children expressed the wish to be more heard and understood, with their opinions being taken into account.

**Conclusions:** Findings propose that child protection workers are 'stuck in the past', in traditional deficit-based discourse, however families prefer 'modern', strengths-based perspectives.

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## 1. Introduction

The context of child welfare work is unique (Mirick, 2014), as child protection workers make difficult decisions that have a significant impact on children and their families, including decisions to remove children and dismantle families (Broadley, 2015; Davidson-Arad & Benbenishty, 2016; DeLong-Hamilton, Krase, & Bundy-Fazioli, 2016; Pölkki, Vornanen, & Colliander, 2016; van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2015), so careful and comprehensive assessment is one of the most significant challenges in the field (Higgins, 2015; Mainstone, 2014). Part of the challenge in examining assessment practices, is family engagement. The importance of engagement in achieving positive outcomes for children and families has been addressed in several studies (Alfandari, 2015; Damman, 2014; Darlington, Healy, & Feeney, 2010; Gladstone et al., 2012; Randolph, Fincham, & Radey, 2009; Schreiber, Fuller, & Paceley, 2013). Improved family engagement is believed to increase the openness of families to workers and to

improve participation in services and other assistance (Loman & Siegel, 2015). Therefore, clients' experiences and perceptions can be a critical component of the child welfare service delivery process (Baker, 2007), being also a crucial part of evidence-based practice (O'Hare, 2005).

Current child protection philosophy holds that to best help the child, it is important to involve them and the parents in the process (Davidson-Arad & Kaznelson, 2010). Harris (2011) states that the interface between parents and child protection agencies has long been a cause of concern. Parton and O'Byrne (2000) stated that traditionally social workers' expertise has been built on the ability to know how to establish relationships as direct face-to-face work with clients is the core of social work, but more recently social workers have taken the role of organizational functionaries. The power position of the child protection system in relation to parents and the extent to which practitioners have time for thorough case planning and building relationships with parents can have an effect on the engagement (Darlington et al., 2010; Gladstone et al., 2012).

Recent studies conducted in Estonia indicate a similar approach discussed by Parton and O'Byrne in 2000. Toros and LaSala (2015a)

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [ere.arbeiter@valgalv.ee](mailto:ere.arbeiter@valgalv.ee) (E. Arbeiter), [karmen.lai@tlu.ee](mailto:karmen.lai@tlu.ee) (K. Toros).

study suggests that assessment practice tends to originate from a 'practitioner as expert' approach. Another study from Estonia reports findings where child protection workers' assessments demonstrate too often an over-reliance on an authoritarian, deficit-based approach that does not sufficiently include family or child perspectives (Toros, LaSala, & Meda, 2015b). Relatively little knowledge and data exist about engagement in child protection practice in Estonia. Given that child protection workers must exercise a high degree of independent professional judgement, there is a need for greater understanding in engaging and empowering families in Estonia (Toros & LaSala, 2015a). Therefore, the overall aim is to explore participants' experiences and perceptions of the engagement, within the context of assessment in a child protection practice. The present study examines perspectives of child protection workers, parents and children along different dimensions including interpretation of engagement, workers' approaches with families in the engagement process, collaboration and relationship, barriers and factors promoting engagement. These perspectives could shed light on what facilitates engagement between families and child protection workers. To provide the context for the study, theoretical framework and a brief overview of Estonian child protection system is provided.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework for the study

The term engagement has been defined by researchers and practitioners, to mean a variety of things, including compliance, involvement, participation, cooperation, collaboration, relationship formation, and service usage (Hollinshead, Kim, Fluke, & Merkel-Holguin, 2015, p. 465). Gallagher et al. (2011, p. 119) refer to a participative sense, to mean the involvement of family members in shaping social work processes. This is a shift away from seeing people as passive beneficiaries of welfare to emphasise the capacity of service users to be active agents in shaping their own lives (Slettebø, 2013). For the purposes of this paper the concept of 'engagement' is based on Merkel-Holguin, Hollinshead, Hahn, Casillas, and Fluke (2015) systems approach, suggesting that family engagement is the result of an interplay between family systems and agency systems. A systemic orientation is based on the idea that in order to facilitate change, the context within which people live must be understood. Germain and Gitterman (1980) discuss that the systemic approach views the reciprocal relationship between people's living system and their environment. Newton, Laible, Carlo, Steele, and McGinley (2014) refer that Bell (1968) developed a theory of bidirectional development, according to which both the parent and the child are active participants in determining environment. Bell (1979) discusses that the well-being of children might result from increased recognition of child effects and reciprocal influences—each participant serves as the stimuli for the other and also change as a result of the same stimulus exchanges. The concept of bi-directionality is fundamental to the understanding of human development within the context of interpersonal relationships (Alexander & Charles, 2009). As all systems affect each other, engagement can be viewed in the same way—child protection workers' approaches and perspectives determine how families respond (see Randolph et al., 2009).

This study is also informed by strengths and empowerment perspectives. Strength-based practices enhance parents' receptivity to intervention (Kemp, Marcenko, Lyons, & Kruzich, 2014). Saleebey (2006) and Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kisthardt (1989) define the strengths-based approach through a set of principles, including the existence of strengths and resources, the client as the expert of his/her situation, collaboration, and belief in growth and change. The strengths perspective enables the profession an opportunity to empower families through developing a respectful and supportive relationship that helps to achieve effective assessments (Blundo, 2006).

### 1.2. A brief overview of child protection system in Estonia

In Estonia, local government creates conditions for the performance of child protection work; the term usually used to refer to providing protection and assistance to children is 'child protection' instead of 'child welfare' (Toros & LaSala, 2015a), as the new *Child Protection Act* (2014), which entered into force in January 2016, stipulates, 'child protection means the aggregate of activities, supports, services and other assistance following the principles provided for in this Act to ensure the rights and well-being of children' (§10). This reflects the general responsibilities of the child protection worker. Reinomägi, Sinisaar, Toros, and Kutsar (2013) elaborate that the worker is responsible for child well-being and the creation of an environment that supports the development of the child, including undertaking assessments and making (removal) decisions. Thus, local governments carry the main burden in the child protection system (*Analysis of regulation of renewal of child protection system*, 2013).

The *Child Protection Act* (2014) specifies clear assessment requirements, including family engagement in the process—children's and parents' (or person raising the child) participation is a requirement in the assessment of the need for assistance. However, this is a new requirement. Previous research suggests Estonian child protection workers' level of skills and/or commitment to engaging families constructively in the assessment process differs; the assessment practices indicate that assessments are done for the client rather than with the client (Toros, 2012). Furthermore, the child is not deemed competent enough to voice his or her opinions and views (Karu, Turk, Biin, & Suvi, 2012; Toros et al., 2015b; Toros, Tiko, & Saia, 2013; Valma, 2012). In Estonian society, the child protection system is seen as searching for evidence of bad parenting, which has resulted in little trust for this profession (Toros, 2011). From the start, child protection workers tend to see parents as potential threats to children; therefore, they look for compliance more than for cooperation. In light of this, some experts question child protective workers' values and understanding of assessment, and argue that the lack of early comprehensive assessment and timely intervention means that children are separated from their families far too frequently (*The Strategy of Children and Families 2012–2020*, 2011). *Analysis of the New Child Protection Act* (2013) reports that the Estonian child welfare system has traditionally focused on consequences rather than prevention and early identification. There is some evidence to support this claim, suggesting that practitioners tend to focus more on a traditional deficit-based approach in their responses and less on capabilities and resources (Lai, 2009; Toros, 2011; Toros & LaSala, 2015a). Additionally, some local governments continue to refer to the child protection worker as the 'child protection inspector'; this implies that an element of investigation and coercion is involved with regard to this role (Toros, 2016).

## 2. Method

In order to explore the participants' experiences and perspectives of the engagement within the context of assessment in child protection practice, a qualitative study was undertaken of a sample of eleven child protection workers, eleven parents and eleven children in one county in South-Estonia. Although internationally child participation is seen as a crucial aspect of child protection and welfare (van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2014), it remains a complex area of practice (Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2016)—their voices are partially invisible during assessment and decision-making (Berrick, Dickens, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2015; van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2015; Cameron & Freymond, 2015; Munford & Sanders, 2016; Toros et al., 2013). For this reason, this study also reports on the perspectives of children, which is an alternative way of looking at engagement from a rights-based approach (van Breda, 2015).

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