



# A systematic scoping review of parental satisfaction with child protection services

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Client satisfaction  
Child protection  
Parental satisfaction  
Service evaluation  
Scoping review

## ABSTRACT

Obtaining parent views on child protection services is an essential part of evaluating service quality and effectiveness. It also promotes the principles of listening to parents and involving them in decision-making. The present review analysed published research that investigated parental perspectives on the child protection services they received. It identified 52 studies published between 2000 and 2016 on parent satisfaction. Most used qualitative methods, and eight standardised survey instruments were used in quantitative studies. Factors related to parent satisfaction or dissatisfaction related to the attitudes and skills of workers, the interventions provided, and aspects of the child protection system. The body of research provides guidance for policymakers and practitioners about strategies to measure and improve client satisfaction.

## 1. Introduction

Obtaining client or consumer views of the services provided to them by human services agencies is an essential part of understanding and monitoring their quality and effectiveness (Harris, 2012; Mundy et al., 2016; Tilbury et al., 2010). Assessment of client satisfaction can be a mechanism to empower clients, and is integral to continuous improvement and quality assurance. As governments in recent years have expanded performance measurement and accountability requirements to include indicators of service responsiveness to client needs, agency efforts to obtain consumer satisfaction feedback have become more common in the health and human services field (Productivity Commission, 2017). The process of asking parents for their opinions may lead them to feel differently about the workers and agencies they interact with, and enhance family-centered practice (Ayala-Nunes, Jumenez, Hidalgo, & Jesus, 2014). Working constructively in partnership with parents is a long-established principle in child welfare (Thoburn, Lewis & Shemmings, 1995). More recently, the importance of this relationship and the working alliance between parents and child protection workers has been re-asserted to counter investigatory, procedural and compliance-oriented intervention styles (Featherstone, Morris & White, 2014). Meaningful involvement of parents can reduce hostility when interventions are involuntary (Kettle, 2015). Systemic cultural bias may also be addressed through integrating the perspectives of parents from indigenous and minority groups, especially given the racial disparities evident in child protection systems (Clarke, 2012; Sawrikar & Katz, 2014; Thoburn et al., 2005).

Research on client satisfaction has recognised the two-way relationship between the worker and the client, and focused on the central role of the relationship in the change process (Gladstone, Dumbrell, Leslie, & Koster, 2012; Sainsbury 1987). It posits a link between client satisfaction and improvements in client outcomes (positive changes in the client's situation or resources) (Magura & Moses, 1986). While good process does not guarantee good outcomes, *how* change is achieved (for example, respect for the person) is an essential part of the effectiveness equation (Tilbury et al., 2010; Long & Frederico, 2014). Further, it has been argued that understanding parental perspectives, then providing targeted support to increase positive parenting (Berger & Font, 2015) and address the barriers that contribute to poor parenting (Escaravage, 2014; Hughes, Chau, & Vokri, 2016) will improve the well being of children.

The present study provides an analysis of published research investigating parental perspectives on the child protection services they have received. The research questions guiding the study were: (1) How much research has been undertaken that obtains the views of parents about their satisfaction with child protection services? (2) What methods have been used to investigate parental satisfaction? and (3) What has research revealed about parental satisfaction: what factors are related to positive experiences or satisfaction with services and what factors are related to negative experiences or dissatisfaction with services?

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## 2. Method

This systematic scoping review was designed to assess the quantity and nature of research conducted on the topic of parent satisfaction in the child protection field. In contrast to systematic evidence reviews designed to investigate “what works” questions, scoping reviews can accommodate diverse methodologies and do not usually involve an assessment of the quality of the methodologies employed in specific studies (Pham et al., 2014). Nevertheless, many of the techniques and steps in systematic evidence reviews are also used in scoping reviews, including a rigorous and transparent approach to searching for, selecting, and analysing the literature as it relates to the research question (Pham et al., 2014). This scoping study used the systematic quantitative literature review method (Pickering & Byrne, 2014), encompassing the following stages: define topic; formulate research questions; search databases using identified keywords; assess articles for relevance; screen using inclusion and exclusion criteria; and enter final sample into computerised database for coding and analysis.

The study reviewed published research articles reporting original empirical findings related to parental satisfaction with child protection services, published from January 2000 to September 2016. Included articles were required to be published in English in peer-review journals with the full text accessible online. The timeframe was selected in order to review recent developments, especially since more human services agencies are taking steps to obtain consumer satisfaction feedback on their provision of services.

Searches were conducted using the electronic databases Cinahl Plus, Medline, Social Services Abstracts (Proquest), PsycINFO (Ovid), Sociological Abstracts (Proquest), Scopus, Current Contents Connect, PubMed, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. Different combinations of the following keywords were used to search titles and abstracts: parent\*; client; service user; caregiver; experience; evaluation; satisfaction; assessment; perception; child protection; child welfare; intervention. Reference lists of the articles comprising the final sample were also examined; and forward citing using Web of Science was utilised to find additional relevant articles. Refer to Fig. 1 for the search process.

The articles identified in these searches were briefly examined prior to download. All studies that were related to the child protection or child welfare system and reported on parental satisfaction, were published after 2000, were peer reviewed, and reported empirical findings (i.e., not review articles, grey literature, opinion, or theoretical pieces) were downloaded into Endnote. After duplicates were removed, there were 150 articles that broadly related to parents in the child protection

system. The abstract and, where necessary, the full text of each of these articles was examined. Articles were excluded if they did not report original data from parents or caregivers related to their dis/satisfaction or positive/negative experiences of services within the child protection or child welfare system.

The articles used multiple terms to describe parental satisfaction – satisfaction, engagement, perceptions, perspectives, experiences, views, voice. This study included parents’ opinions about the process, the worker, or the agency while research that primarily measured or examined the degree of participation or nature of parental involvement (for example, working alliance, engagement) was screened out, regardless of the terms used in the article. Examples of excluded articles were levels of parent participation in case planning, parent characteristics (e.g., needs, resilience, hope), and parent compliance with treatment. For articles that reported on the same study and drew on the same data, the most recent publication was chosen, and if published in the same year, the most comprehensive of the papers was chosen. The database searches were conducted by one researcher and inclusions and exclusions were checked by the first author. There were 52 studies remaining after this process was completed (listed in Supplementary Table 1).

Each article was read and relevant information entered into an electronic database. The information recorded included the authors, publication details, research country, methods and sample details, and the primary findings related to parental dis/satisfaction and/or positive/negative experiences. The electronic coding system facilitated the descriptive statistical analysis reported in the results section. Recurring themes in the primary findings identified throughout the coding process were progressively noted in the electronic database. The summary of findings for each article were then re-read and coded according to the common themes. At the end of this process, similar themes that had major overlaps were merged. The final sample of published articles included 33 (63.5%) papers that focused on parental perceptions of the child protection system in general, 11 (21.2%) that focused on parental perceptions of a specific component of the child protection system (e.g. in-home services, case conferences, family preservation programs), and 8 (15.4%) that were primarily focused on parents whose children had been placed in out-of-home care.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Summary of research characteristics

Most of the 52 studies exploring parental satisfaction with child protection services were conducted in the United States ( $n = 20$ , 38.5%) followed by Canada ( $n = 11$ , 21.2%), Australia ( $n = 8$ , 15.4%), the United Kingdom ( $n = 6$ , 11.5%), Norway ( $n = 2$ , 3.9%), Sweden ( $n = 1$ , 1.9%), Ireland ( $n = 1$ , 1.9%), and Israel ( $n = 1$ , 1.9%). There were two (3.9%) comparative studies involving the United Kingdom, one with Norway and another with Norway and Sweden. Most were published in *Child and Family Social Work* ( $n = 12$ ), followed by *Children and Youth Services Review* ( $n = 8$ ), and *Child Welfare* ( $n = 4$ ). Though the average number of publications since 2000 has been 3, the general trend is increasing, with a spike of 10 publications in 2012.

The majority of studies ( $n = 25$ , 48.1%) involved only parents, while 16 (30.8%) included parents and others such as grandparents, carers, workers and children in the samples. The remaining described their sample generically as carers. Of the 43 studies that reported the gender composition of their sample, five included only women while the remaining included both men and women. The ethnicity of participants was reported in 34 studies with most ( $n = 26$ , 76.5%) comprised of a mix of ethnicities. The remaining 8 studies focused on a specific population, such as Hispanic, Afro-Caribbean, First Nations, or Mexican.

In terms of methodology, 33 (63.5%) articles were qualitative, 9 ( $n = 17.3\%$ ) were quantitative and 10 ( $n = 19.2\%$ ) used mixed

Identification	150 records after duplicates removed ↓
Screening	98 records excluded – Non-empirical papers excluded – Papers about level or nature of parent involvement excluded – If more than one paper per study, only one included (most recent or most comprehensive) ↓
Selection	52 papers included

Fig. 1. Process for search strategy.

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