The involuntary removal of a child from his or her parent’s home is a significant state intervention in the private relations of children and their parents. These decisions are based on the assumption that in some situations parental care of a child should be replaced by public care. In these instances, parents’ rights to raise a child are restricted or even terminated. Although the final determinations relating to removals (variably called “care orders” in many European countries) are made by courts or court-like institutions in most countries (Burns et al. forthcoming), it is the child protection worker’s judgement that initiates the decision-making process to remove the child.

In this study we explore “care order” decision-making from the point of view of front-line practice. In particular, we focus on parents and how they may be involved in social work decision-making. We focus on one point in the care order process: when the child protection worker discusses with the parents his/her considerations regarding child removal.

The study is informed by the political discourse of Habermas (1996) and his framework for understanding the legitimacy of state-level decision making vis-à-vis the citizenry. In this perspective, legitimacy is made more robust when decisions are deliberated with the inclusion of those whose lives are directly affected by state intervention. In the context of child welfare, this means parents should be involved in decision-making to the extent that they are heard, that their perspectives and interests are included and considered, and that they are given adequate information (Berrick et al., in press). To study this empirically and to compare findings across national contexts, we used a vignette method so that when workers were asked about parents’ participation they departed from the same scenario.

Child protection workers were asked questions about the importance of parents’ participation in three domains: 1) providing information to the parents; 2) collecting information from parents; and 3) ensuring the inclusion of parents in the decision-making process.

We explore child protection workers’ views about parents’ involvement in decision-making in four countries: Finland, Norway, England and the USA (California). The countries represent different child welfare systems with Norway and Finland typically categorized as ‘family service systems’ and the US as a ‘child protection system.’ England, previously aligned with the US as a ‘child protection system’ has shifted over time and is now considered somewhere in between -- a hybrid system --where family services may be provided as part of a highly regulated child protection system (Gilbert et al. 2011).
Findings from the study clearly indicate that involvement of parents is important in all four countries, suggesting that this is a highly regarded norm in child welfare practice. In particular, workers in all four countries prioritized the value of providing information to parents. In California, where the investigatory functions of child welfare still predominate at the front-end of the system, we see a high value placed on obtaining information from parents. In the Nordic countries, where a family support system prevails, we see greater emphasis placed on providing information to parents. Aside from these findings, however, we do not see a consistent pattern of difference regarding parental involvement along the lines of the well-known child protection or family service orientations.

The aim in each child welfare system is to include parents, but the precise ways in which it is done (or not) vary. The findings suggest that the overall aim to engage parents should not be taken for granted; it is important to look in detail at the way that legislation, local protocols, and organizational context shape the way that parental involvement is understood and practiced.

Results from the study underscore the value child protection workers ascribe to parents in their practice. Although their views do not align cleanly with the child welfare system contexts in which they are embedded, the overall consensus about the involvement of parents among child protection staff across the countries can be contrasted with other data from the same survey about the involvement of children (Berrick et al. in press). Here, there was much greater variation in the workers’ responses regarding children’s involvement in care order preparations. This supports a recent cross-country analysis of child welfare systems by Gilbert et al. (2011), which noted that a child-centric orientation is an emerging trend, although not yet well established. The decision-making systems take adults – parents in this case – as the standard partners and children are given a more contested and rhetorical position in child welfare decision making. The traditions of viewing parents as the key actors have a much longer history in child welfare ideology, policy and practice, reflected in these results.

For more information see

References