# THE VOICE OF THE CHILD: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM IN LITHUANIAN FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

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**Abstract.** *This paper explains the current practices of the child welfare system in the context of Lithuania. In Europe, research on child welfare has a long history; however, the child welfare situation in Lithuania has not been systematically studied, nor has it been provided with the research-based knowledge necessary for the development of the system. Based on qualitative research results, the paper sheds light on how the voice of the child is heard in Lithuanian child and family social work practice. The research participants in the present study were children and family social workers. The research results indicate that adult-centered family social work practices are dominant and the voice of the child is misleading in the intervention process.*
**Keywords:** *child protection, child and family social work, the voice of the child.*

## Introduction

In Lithuania, child protection units are separated from social work services in child and family welfare (Nygren et al., 2018; Gilbert, 2012). As observed by Anghel et al. (2013), the gap between policy and practice has become extremely visible, whilst the child has become invisible or has been named as a group of "children left behind." The present paper is a part of a larger research project called "Designing the Systemic Model of Child Welfare Moving from Child Protection to Development of Psychosocial Support for Families" (Agreement No. S-MIP-19-17, funded by the Research Council of Lithuania). This paper provides a description and analysis of the voice of children and family social workers. A systematic approach based on ecological systems perspective was used in terms of the child's well-being, which was researched as the interaction between the child's development and the social environment.

In Europe, research on child welfare has a long history; however, the child welfare situation in Lithuania has not been systematically studied, nor has it been

provided with the research-based knowledge necessary for the development of the system. This leads to the fragmentation of real practice, the division of society, and the insecurity of the child and the family. Social services have evoked multidimensional phenomena, where different participants play different roles. There is a need to look simultaneously at actions and contextual structures within the actions that occur. Social workers experience a lot of pressure in their daily work, especially in child welfare (Koskinen, 2014). In practical cases, family social workers very often focus on parental issues; therefore, the child is no longer the focus of intervention.

According to Bastian (2020), a child-centered perspective is a dominant orientation in child protection practice, with the focus on children's needs, wishes, and rights in professional decision making. Odinokova and Rusakova (2019) state that children's participation in decision making is articulated as the child's right, which has constructive significance for society and the child. Horwath and Tarr (2015) suggest that child-centered practice means not only giving children a voice in situations where they need protection but also requiring that professionals maintain the focus on children and their needs throughout the assessment and subsequent intervention.

The paper aims to disclose the voices of children and family social workers through the analysis of their personal and professional experiences in the context of family social work practice in Lithuania. The paper raises the following research question: How is the voice of the child heard in Lithuanian child and family social work practice? Qualitative research served as the methodological framework for this study. In order to answer to the research question, semi-structured interviews with children and family social workers were carried out. All the processes of data gathering and data analysis are presented in the methodological part of this paper. This research provides knowledge about the concept of "an adult child" and children's voices on their well-being. The following part of the paper briefly discusses family social workers' constructions of children who receive social services. After that, the research methodology and findings are discussed. The final part of the paper provides conclusions.

## The Role of the Child in the Child Welfare System

Recently, the topic of the welfare of the child and the protection of his or her rights has become a central issue in every democratic country. The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations in 1989 and ratified in Lithuania in 1992. Pursuant to Article 3 of the Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania (2006), social services are the services aimed at providing assistance to a person (a family) who, by reason of his or her age, disability, social problems, partially or completely lacks, has not acquired or has lost the abilities

and possibilities to independently care for his or her private (family) life and to participate in society. The ratification implies that a State Party undertakes to respect, protect, and fulfill all the rights of the child enshrined in the above-mentioned Convention. In order to establish and develop child welfare systems, the states should establish child welfare legislation, services, and institutions. The concept of the welfare of the child defines the implementation of the four basic principles enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989. These principles include ensuring the protection of the child against all forms of discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to live and develop, and the right of freedom of expression of his or her own opinion. The well-being of the child includes areas such as material situation, housing, health, subjective well-being of the child and the family, education, interpersonal relationships, civic participation, and safety. Skinner et al. (2007) state that outcomes of the well-being of the child are the interaction between resources and risk factors affecting the child's personal life, his or her family, school, or the wider society.

States have come a long way in designing and developing child welfare systems. Kahn (2010) and Ben-Arieh (2010) define this development as a path moving from the pursuit of saving the child's life to the pursuit of ensuring the child's development. The authors explain that at the beginning of the development of child welfare systems, the well-being of the child was determined by the following indicators: the survival of the child and attention to negative things (parental dysfunctional behavior), highlighting the development of child welfare with the focus on future actions. In this stage, only adults' perspective was taken into consideration. Meanwhile, the contemporary concept of child well-being includes indicators such as child well-being now, with a focus on positive changes in the child's life. Thus, specialists are obliged to involve the perspective of the child. The States undertake to protect children from violence and neglect and to provide all necessary assistance to families and other institutions in order to support children (Kelly et al., 2011). Children and families with needs face a variety of problems and barriers to the child's healthy development. The States must therefore develop service systems to provide services that are easily accessible, affordable, and able to meet a variety of needs, with early intervention options, and services for families facing difficult situations to address long-standing conflicts, abuse, or neglect. In Lithuania, family and child welfare specialists are dealing with such difficulties as accessibility to needed services and the diversity of the offered service network.

Jensen et al. (2020) identified the following constructions of children and childhood: (a) "children in light of parents," (b) "the generalized child," (c) "the participating child," and (d) "the child in need of protection." Their study revealed common features, which are also recognizable in the context of Lithuanian family

social work practice. Children are considered as objects but not subjects of intervention. In the construction of "children in light of parents," the focus is on parents' intervention, where the child becomes invisible. Family social workers concentrate on parents, believing that changes in parents' behavior have a direct influence on the well-being of the child. Jensen et al. (2020) also constructed the theme "the generalized child." This discourse refers to the construction of the child without focusing on such topics as children's feelings, their wishes, and a sense of self. One more relevant topic highlighted by the researchers is "the participating child." This opens the gap between practitioners and children in such areas as decision making and involvement in assessment procedures. Jensen et al. (2020) elaborate the theme of "the child in need of protection," where children are usually constructed as a problem. Ng (2005) observes that social work with children tends to focus on providing services to meet children's basic developmental needs more than their rights. The researcher emphasizes the difference between needs-based and rights-based approaches, which lies in the fact that action based on needs can lead to charity and a rights-based approach can be viewed as justice.

In Lithuania, family social workers practically apply features of psychological service discourses rather than the alternative ones which promote the rights of the child and family in social work practice. Family social workers build up their clients' profile by highlighting their weaknesses, such as a lack of social or parenting skills, especially in cases of alcoholic parents or ex-convict parents. Thus, a child-focused intervention is misleading as the focus is actually on parents' behavior (Motiečienė, 2020). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) states that, first of all, children must be seen as active participants in their everyday life firstly.

## Research Methodology

In order to attain a greater understanding of how the voice of the child is heard within Lithuanian child and family social work practice, a grounded theory methodology approach was applied. As a means to answer the research question, semi-structured interviews with 19 children (in the research coded CH 1–19) and 18 family social workers were carried out. The study was conducted in two communities in Lithuania. In total, 11 social workers from the urban area (in the text coded as USW 1–11) and 7 from the rural area (in the text coded as RSW 1-7) participated in the research. The interviews were conducted from March to December 2020. The data analysis was based on the method of thematic analysis. At the first stage of the research, the interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews were transcribed immediately. At the second stage, a careful reading of the transcripts was implemented, and then they were used for coding the

material. The length of the interviews varied from 1 to 2.5 hours. Qualitative research requires a data analysis method, which clearly explains arguments and places emphasis on understanding complexity, details, and context (Mason, 2007). In the present research, thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was applied. The first step involved reading and re-reading the transcribed texts in order to identify common themes which appeared in the categorizations of the text fragments. The thematic analysis was conducted in order to reveal research material systematically and produce an informed description of the research phenomenon. As soon as the interview transcripts were prepared, meaning units were joined into codes. Meaning units consisted of features that were mainly related to the interests of the study, which were implemented when an inductive analysis was carried out. The study complied with general research ethics guidelines and ethical research principles (Peled & Leichtentritt, 2002; Bryman, 2008). Every research participant was respected with his or her right to autonomy when accepting the decision to participate in the research or not. The principle of confidentiality was also applied. As Israel and Hay (2006) state, the principle of confidentiality is crucial; thus, the names of the research participants and their geographical location were coded. In addition, written submissions to interview the children were obtained from the parents.

## Research Results

**Definition and visibility of the child: perspectives of family social workers.** Jensen et al. (2020) note that social workers dealing with family issues tend to focus on parent's needs more than on children's needs, concerns, views, and problems, which makes children less visible as the acknowledged family members. Farmer and Owen (1998), Eidukevičiūtė (2013), Laird et al. (2017), and Motiečienė (2020) also point out that agencies usually reach mothers as preferable carers of children. To refer to such focus on the mother as a preferable referee in family social work, Jensen et al. (2020) use the term "mother-centeredness."

When analyzing the perspective of the family social worker, Toros (2017) observes that research participants tend to focus more on problems, failures, and deficits of clients and parental incompetence. The researcher also note that the relationship with service users is represented in an authoritative manner—searching for the guilty party in the assessment rather than providing assistance and support for the child and the family. The situation of the child is constructed in a similar way in which the issues of adult family members are constructed. Children are distinguished by gender, and it can be observed that boys, as stated by social workers who participated in the research, are more often described as demonstrating problematic behavior than girls, and children from the same family

are divided into good children and problematic ones. The structure of this division can also be observed in the provision of assistance to adult family members.

*The child, the teenager, did not communicate fully with that mother, and the mother got along very well with the girl, and that sister had a very good relationship with that brother. Throughout that process, all services are directed only towards the mother.* (RSW, 1)

Horwath and Tarr (2015) highlight that when trying to find solutions to improve the child's situation, social workers tend to focus more on the change of parental behavior rather than on child-focused outcomes. Farmer and Lutman (2010) emphasize that in case of child neglect, parents are given too many chances to change while children cannot afford to wait. This brings about the lack of attention to the identity of children and the differing needs of siblings. According to social workers who participated in this research, distant or maltreating parenting affects the child's behavior, self-presentation, self-awareness, and vulnerability. This construction of the maltreated child leads to "the child in need of protection." In the child protection context, social workers see children as human beings in need of protection.

*Probably these are very sensitive children, probably emotionally hurt and affected; however, at the same time, they are very defensive. They are relatively reserved, and it is very difficult to establish a true emotional relationship with them. Children who feel well often require physical contact: they want to be hugged, to be in contact, and to be taken care of. However, children who have emotional and behavioral disorders and/or delinquent behaviors very often tend to belittle themselves. They tend to underestimate their achievements, their self-esteem. Well, they seem to be in trouble* (RSW, 2).

It could be noted that children tend to be constructed as a problem. Horwath and Tarr (2014) reveal different understanding of how the well-being of the child depends on parental relationship and care, without blaming the child for change in behavior as a personal and conscious choice. Fern (2014) maintains that in their professional practice, social workers observed dichotomized childhood: children were competent or incompetent, depending on attitudinal positions between the child as the subject of rights and the object of rescue. These polarized views were considered problematic because of the fixed attitudes, which made it difficult for practitioners to respond in a way that would have individualized children's preferences. The social workers who participated in the present research also noted this polarization, when children using or abusing legal discourse lose their innocence, which could be attributed to "the child in need of protection." What is more, innocence and vulnerability are seen by the research participants as features attributable to "the child in need for protection" but only in the case of younger children.

*Children know their rights now; they know what they can. They know that if parents treat them in a harsh way, this can be considered psychological violence. If you touch them, and they say they have been beaten, it will also be in the best interests of the children, not the parents, and procedures will start, and it will take time to prove it was otherwise, and so on* (USW, 4).

The research data revealed that the child and his or her family are described as dysfunctional, when the child is maltreated and in need of protection. The child is involved in the assessment stage, observing his or her behavior as a consequence of maltreating parenthood, without the focus on behavioral and emotional development. The visibility of the child ends in the assessment stage of the intervention process.

**Subjective well-being of the child: the voice of the child.** While conceptualizing the well-being of the child's, this concept highlights the interactions between resources and risk factors that affect the child and his or her parents' lives in such spheres as the child's personal life, his or her family, school, or the wider society. The data obtained during the study reveals that when children talk about what is important to them in their personal lives, they mention the importance of the family, permanent home, and positive relationships in the family and in the surrounding environment. The research participants-the children-who participated in this research were asked to express their thoughts about what were the most important things in their life. The answers to this question revealed the main issue: the importance of a nuclear family. The data analysis showed that the children highlighted the role of the mother and the sister/brother, and in several cases, the father was also mentioned.

The research participants-the children-focused on environmental factors related to community resources. This included universal services such as day care services for meaningful leisure activities and the participation in school activities. One of the children stated that the participation in the school activities was the most important thing for him. This revealed the meaning of school in children's lives.

*It is important for me to be involved everywhere and in everything at school* (CH, 18).

All the children who participated in this research are the participants of the social service system. This means that they are receiving specialized social services, with the family social worker being the main provider of these services. Some of the children are living in a family crisis center; others, in their own homes. Probably this determined the emergence of the second topic, which was revealed while analyzing the interviews with the children. The researchers asked children about when they felt happy in their lives. The children's answers revealed sensitive topics. Some of them provided the following answers:

*When I get along with my mom* (CH, 2).

*When my family is happy ...* (CH, 4).

In the study, the children expressed their voice by talking about a microsystem that includes the child's personal characteristics, interactions with his or her family, friends, neighbors, school, and others. The children who participated in this study reaffirmed the hypothesis that a properly functioning microsystem has the greatest impact on the personal well-being of the child.

It should be emphasized that children dream of their full acceptance, emphasizing their right to err, to be heard, and to be accepted. Children, as the most vulnerable group of society, have the right to express their own views of their personal lives, they have the right to have their best interests safeguarded and, at the same time, the right to live and develop without discrimination. When talking about the sense of happiness, one of the children, aged 6, stated:

*When you respect me, when you love me, when you play with me, when you draw with me, when you talk to me, and when you can help me when I am sad and when you can forgive me* (CH, 19).

The researchers tried to reveal what the children were dreaming of. The dreams and wishes of some of the children centered around material things, but others admitted that their greatest wish was to meet their father or grandmother. This shed light on the topic of basic needs. The most important thing for little children is to have their own private sphere for living independently from institutional care. In the assessment framework, this refers to family and environmental factors, when the need for housing must be evaluated by specialists.

*I am dreaming of leaving the institution and going to my home as soon as possible* (CH, 12).

White (2003) states that children's voices create stories which open opportunities to shed light on the lived reality of the family. This helps to hear the voice of the child and not to apply adult-centered family social work practices. The children who participated in this research revealed that they could express their feelings and emotions while receiving social services. The researchers were trying to go deeper and understand what worried the children most. The children told that they felt sense of concern about the relationship between their family members. They wished to have positive relationships in their lived reality, especially in their family environment. Because of conflicts between the parents, the children felt fear. One of the children, aged 5, who participated in the research said:

*I'm afraid of the police because when my dad gets angry, they come* (CH, 17).

Ferguson (2017) described the concept of "the invisible child." The author researched the reasons why children so often become invisible in social work. It was revealed that the reason for this is the fact that family social workers are too much parent-focused, and therefore they fail to get in contact with the child. Ferguson (2017) argues that when children in families become invisible, detachment from children occurs. This point is very important especially nowadays when, due to COVID-19, the world is living in the pandemic context. Under such circumstances, during the lockdown, social work practice with children and families means that domestic violence and child abuse may be unrevealed (Caron et al., 2020). For this reason, family social workers and other specialists should focus more on children, especially on their feelings and

emotions, rather than on results, especially in the teaching process. Humphreys et al. (2020) also highlight the fact that the risks of family violence will persist for some time. In this research, the children also expressed their concern about the COVID-19 situation; however, one of the children revealed how he was coping with this feeling. One of the research participants, aged 10, explained:

*During the quarantine, we have lessons and have to learn. Sometimes, when a failure or technical problems occur, I get nervous and face difficulty, and I don't trust myself that I can solve these technical problems by myself. ... the school doesn't help at all* (CH, 18).

The research data indicate that children can construct guidelines for their future. The analysis of this topic revealed the dominant discourse, in which a happy life of children is associated with parents' positive behavior. In this research, the children focused most on their emotional well-being. This fact should receive due attention from parents, family social workers, teachers, and other persons who are part of children's lives. It is child-centered family social work practice that is particularly needed in today's circumstances in order for children's voices to be heard.

## Conclusions

1. In Lithuania, the situation of the protection of the rights of the child is constructed in a discourse where the problem to be solved through special interventions is addressed by focusing mainly on the protection of children from dysfunctional parenting. The state provides that the family has the right to its own privacy, yet the relationship is not voluntary, but coercive. The child's perspective and voice are minimally taken into consideration because it is parents' voice that is dominant in intervention processes.
2. The provision of social services for families remains a sensitive issue due to the lack of focus on preventive or universal services for the child and his or her parents. The research indicates that there is a need for universal services in the areas of education and leisure, which was clearly pointed out by the research participants—the children.
3. The issue that arises in the context of family social work in Lithuania is that it is not the child but parental problems that are the focus of family social work interventions, which leads to the simplification and depersonalization of the child's participation in the process. Child-related issues tend to be simplified to a mere description of estranged behavior and the fulfillment of basic physical needs. Although the consideration of the child's voice can be observed in the assessment stage, the intervention process carried out by family social workers focuses more on changing the relation, attitudes, and behavior of parents, especially of the mother, than on the child.

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