

# Child protection in Finland: Recent trends in political debates, support systems and legislation

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# In the comparative contexts,

- The Finnish child welfare system is typically seen as being oriented towards family services and child-centeredness
  - This orientation has been evident since the second Child Welfare Act in 1983
    - The child's best interest
    - An emphasis on voluntary in-home services
- In addition, the Finnish child welfare system is typically seen as being 'a Nordic child welfare system'
  - Child welfare as part of the universal welfare state services and benefits
  - However, there are also considerable differences among the systems
    - One example: the decision-making of care orders (Hultman et al. 2018): professionalised, hybrid and layperson decision-making models
- The system characteristics are based mainly on legislation and policy ambitions
  - Child welfare as practice or lived experienced may not match with some characteristics and therefore, 'the Finnish child welfare system' is much more complex

The slot of 35 minutes leads me to summarise heavily the present intense interests in child protection

- the media

- legislative changes

- policy programs

- national and local development projects

- etc.

# The trend at the moment?: Confusion about the role and tasks of child protection

What is and what is not child protection?

The balance between the Child Welfare Act and the Social Welfare Act

What is the role of child protection for teenagers?

The recent reform of child welfare legislation

What is the relevant knowledge in child protection?

Multiprofessionalism vs. social work

Research vs. experiential knowledge

Legal vs. other types of knowledge

# What is and what is not child protection?

The general view is that the less child protection there is, the better.

That is why the policy programs emphasise early intervention and preventative services.

The growing numbers of children receiving child protection services (both in-home and out-of-home) since the mid-1990s have constantly been in the focus of a range of policy programs.

In 2015, a new Social Welfare Act was introduced with a new approach to 'family services' 'Services to families with children' should be given on a low threshold, close to the everyday-life of the families, multiprofessionally, and without any registration in child protection.

The impact of the new legislation was reflected in a dramatic decline in new registrations of children in child protection (receiving in-home services), but also in confusion as to what the difference between services and service-criteria according to the different Acts is in practice.

Two different ways to provide family work or home help?

One of the main findings in the statistical report of child welfare in 2020  
(Report 28/2020 by THL)  
is:

”Never before have there been so many children and young people in  
emergency placements, in care or in other types of placement as in 2019.”

There is a current dilemma: Basically, the overall view in policy is that child protection is best when it is at its smallest; yet, the attempts to decrease its role in the service-system has resulted in increasing the numbers of children in out-of-home care in child protection.

The border between child protection and other services – family services, education, health care – is far from being clear or settled. There is still a tendency that child protection deals with issues which other services do not manage or do not want to work with (e.g. the ladder model) and this is especially the case of out-of-home care.



What is the role of child protection – and that of residential care in particular – for teenagers?

Teenagers challenge the present child protection and residential care in particular

- high numbers in entering and being in the system
- methods and measures used in child protection
- concerns about the outcome of child protection
- The Parliamentary Ombudsman has pointed out several violations of children's rights in residential care (e.g. OPCAT).

In 2020, the major report of research-based practices for taking care of teenagers was published (Heino 2020).

The conclusions and recommendations stretch over 23 pages and request changes in general measures and substitute care itself.

In 2020, a reform of child welfare legislation was proposed (government proposal) which introduces, among other issues, the classification of different degrees of residential care ('demanding residential care'), specifying restrictive measures and 'special care'.

The proposal also includes a variety of specifications of practice in residential care (legal norms vs. practitioners' skills)

The established ways to think of young people's problems, needs and rights are under intense change

- "asocial children and young people" vs. children and young people with psychiatric and neuropsychological issues – the border between child protection and mental health care
- Individual rights of children and young people in care settings vs. the upbringing and treatment methods of residential care
- New frames to approach teenage behaviour (e.g. "run-aways and human trafficking", bullying at school as an issue for child protection), new tasks for statutory child protection

The confusion about the relations between child protection and teenagers is likely to be further strengthened by the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on children and young people with different (formal and informal) support systems to help them cope with the uncertainty and unexpected changes in their life trajectories.

What is the relevant knowledge in child protection?

For a long time, child protection has been the domain of professional social work  
+ multiprofessional networks of the service system + public administration and public law +  
NGOs + voluntary work + lay expertise etc.

At the moment, the knowledge base is debated:

- Social workers should employ more relationship-based and systemic approaches in their work
  - Family therapy orientations
  - More interaction with children in particular
- Service-user participation should be an integral element of the knowledge-base
  - Experiential knowledge of experts by experience (children in particular)
- Social workers should also have a more prominent role in supervising the quality of service-provision, reporting shortcomings in the services and promoting structural social change
- There should be more integrated, multiprofessional platforms for professionals and more information exchange between different practitioners
- Legislation and human rights, children's rights in particular, should guide professional practices
  - The quality of practices should be assessed accordingly
- Research-based practice has also been suggested, including evidence-based methods

The wide notions of 'relevant knowledge' challenge the ways how child protection is talked about and assessed.

# Concluding remarks

- The current confusion about the role and tasks of child protection takes many forms and many directions.
  - More attention is given to the ill-functioning elements than the well-functioning elements of child protection
  - The motives are a mixture, including the acknowledgement of children's individual rights and the concerns about high social and economic investment
- The multiple fields of confusion make it difficult to anticipate the next steps and how coherent they will be and what kind of understanding of childhood and family life they will employ.

# References

- Heino, T. (eds) (2020) Mikä auttaa? Tutkimusperustaiset ja käytännössä toimivat työmenetelmät teininä sijoitettujen lasten hoidossa [What helps? Research-based and proven working methods in the treatment of teenagers who have been placed in care]. Report 12. Helsinki: THL.
- Hultman, E., T. Forkby, and S. Höjer. 2018. “Professionalised, Hybrid, and Layperson Models in Nordic Child Protection: Actors in Decision-making in Out of Home Placements.” Nordic Social Work Research. doi:10.1080/2156857X.2018.1538897.