Check for updates

Child & Family Social Work

WILEY

CHILD & FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Laying the Groundwork for a Caseworker Engagement Questionnaire: Theoretical and Practice-Oriented Reflections From a Nordic Welfare Context

Anne Marie Villumsen | Signe Boe Rayce | Maiken Pontoppidan

Department of Education and Children, VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research, Copenhagen, Denmark

Correspondence: Anne Marie Villumsen (amav@vive.dk)

Received: 7 March 2025 | **Revised:** 4 July 2025 | **Accepted:** 17 July 2025

Funding: This study was supported by the TrygFonden.

Keywords: casework | child and family welfare | collaborative relationship | worker engagement

ABSTRACT

Engagement—defined as the quality of the collaborative relationship between caseworkers and families and level of involvement in case work—is essential for effective intervention in statutory social work. However, it is often challenged by inherent power imbalances and the involuntary nature of the setting. Although previous research focuses on client engagement, it is important to recognize that engagement is a reciprocal construct; collaboration requires engagement from both client and caseworker. Yet the caseworker engagement remains underexplored, and no validated instrument currently exists to assess it in Nordic child and family welfare. This article presents the development of a questionnaire aimed at assessing caseworker engagement in statutory child and family welfare. The aim is, first, to introduce the theoretical framework underpinning the tool and outline the methodological design steps and, second, to explore how caseworkers perceive its potential relevance in practice. Drawing on qualitative interviews with eight caseworkers, the study provides early insights into how the tool may be used in practice, while also identifying key limitations. As this study represents preliminary, exploratory work, further development, testing and validation are necessary to ensure the questionnaire's reliability and applicability in both research and practice.

1 | Introduction

Engagement is conceptualized as the quality of the collaborative relationship between caseworkers and families and involvement in case work (Trotter 2002). Assessing such relationships in professional settings is complex, particularly given the inherent power dynamics between caseworkers and families at risk (Bekaert et al. 2021; Samsonsen and Willumsen 2015; Tembo and Studsrød 2019). This article explores the concept of caseworker engagement (hereinafter referred to as worker engagement) within the realm of child and family welfare.

Worker engagement is a critical yet understudied dimension of effective practice in child and family social work. Although engagement has traditionally been conceptualized from the perspective of service users—particularly parents in child protection contexts—this relationship is inherently reciprocal (Villumsen et al. 2025). A truly collaborative casework process depends not only on client involvement but equally on the caseworker's active and reflective participation. Although research has consistently linked client engagement to improved outcomes (Damiani-Taraba et al. 2017; Cheng and Lo 2016; Gladstone et al. 2012; Charest-Belzile et al. 2020; Gockel et al. 2008; Altman 2008a, 2008b) and positive family experiences (e.g., Kemp et al. 2014; Gladstone et al. 2012; Cheng and Lo 2016; Xu et al. 2017), far less attention has been paid to the role of worker engagement in casework with vulnerable children and families. Notably, despite the existence of validated tools for assessing client engagement (e.g.,

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

© 2025 The Author(s). *Child & Family Social Work* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Yatchmenoff 2005), no equivalent instrument currently exists to measure the engagement of caseworkers themselves.

Damiani-Taraba et al. (2017) examined the relationship between caseworkers and child protection clients, uncovering that client engagement could predict worker engagement in a mutually iterative process. They highlighted critical caseworker skills necessary for enhancing client engagement, including effectively addressing client concerns, actively involving parents in casework, refraining from making requests that parents find irrelevant and connecting clients with suitable services. Their study further indicates that empathetic and considerate caseworkers are more likely to be engaged, with worker engagement being a predictor of case outcomes and the probability of future rereferrals to agencies (Damiani-Taraba et al. 2017).

In a similar vein, Gladstone et al. (2014) explored the relationship between caseworker skills and parent/worker engagement. They identified four skills associated with parental engagement and three skills linked to worker engagement, including involving parents in planning, being supportive and caring, and praising parents for their efforts and contributions. The study concluded that skills in collaborative relationship building and employing an antioppressive approach are crucial for fostering engagement among both parents and workers, linking worker engagement to additional factors such as stress, burnout, experience and the work environment (Gladstone et al. 2014).

Cheng and Lo (2020) focused on how caseworker engagement, as perceived by parents, related to various parental characteristics like ethnicity, parental capacities and problem severity. They identified seven factors that parents associate with worker engagement. The findings suggest that caseworkers should prioritize improving parents' interpersonal relationships, particularly the worker–parent relationship, with special attention to parents facing out-of-home placements, those with mental health challenges and low-income families (Cheng and Lo 2020). Earlier work by Cheng and Lo (2016) also link parental progress to factors such as collaborative engagement, the working relationship and specific caseworker characteristics.

To sum up, despite growing recognition of the importance of worker engagement in child and family case work, research in this area remains limited—particularly when compared to the focus on client engagement. Empirical studies that explicitly examine the nature, dynamics or impact of caseworker engagement are few, and there is a marked absence of tools for assessing it. This gap is especially pronounced in the Nordic welfare context, where no existing questionnaire has been developed to examine caseworker engagement with families within the specific institutional and cultural frameworks of a child and family welfare system.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is twofold: first, to present the theoretical and conceptual framework that guided the development of a questionnaire assessing worker engagement and, second, to explore its preliminary relevance and perceived value in social work practice through qualitative interviews with caseworkers. As this is an exploratory study, the questionnaire should be considered an early step towards developing a tool for future research and practice.

2 | Development of the Worker Engagement Framework

This section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the development of the worker engagement questionnaire, including the process of translation and cultural adaptation for a Nordic child and family welfare context. The development of the worker engagement questionnaire was informed by existing scholarly work on client and worker engagement, particularly foundational contributions from Canadian researchers (Gladstone et al. 2012, 2014) and Australian studies (Trotter 2002). The worker engagement questionnaire is designed as a self-report measure intended to complement the client engagement questionnaire, providing a parallel perspective on the collaborative relationship from the worker's side.

Because the concept of worker engagement is embedded within broader systemic and cultural frameworks, it was crucial to adapt the questionnaire not only linguistically but also contextually. Social services systems differ substantially across countries in terms of scope, values and intervention thresholds. For instance, Denmark's child and family welfare system, rooted in the Nordic Welfare State model (Greve 2007), emphasizes both universal and targeted services. It prioritizes family preservation and early harm prevention, setting a relatively low threshold for intervention to address challenges before harm occurs (Pösö et al. 2014). In contrast, child protection systems in countries like the United States are more reactive, intervening primarily after harm has been substantiated (Gilbert 2007; Gilbert et al. 2011). These systemic differences shape how caseworkers understand and approach their role, adding further complexity to developing a meaningful questionnaire on worker engagement.

In this methodological section, we outline the process through which the questionnaire was not only translated linguistically but also culturally adapted to ensure its relevance and sensitivity to a Nordic context. Equally important, we tested the questionnaire with frontline caseworkers currently employed in child and family welfare services. This step was essential to ensure that both the selected questions and their wording were appropriate for, and resonant with, the specific features of the Nordic social service system.

The questionnaire was developed through a synthesis of existing engagement research, with particular focus on its relevance to statutory social work within the Nordic setting. With further development and psychometrical validation, the questionnaire may serve as a research tool in future studies or a reflective instrument in practice. Although the present study does not attempt to predict its future use, we include qualitative findings on its perceived relevance and usability in daily practice to explore this potential.

2.1 | Inspiration From the Client Engagement Scale

We began by examining the Client Engagement Scale (CES) developed by Yatchmenoff (2005), originally intended to measure client engagement within a child protection social service system. This provided a foundation for developing a framework of relevant questions tailored to assess worker engagement. The 19-item CES was initially developed from a pool

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

of 37 items representing five dimensions: *receptivity*, *expectancy*, *investment*, *working relationship* and *mistrust*. Table 1 provides an overview of the different dimensions and their content.

In the present study, the original 37-item pool was used to capture a broader conceptual basis and allow for a more context-sensitive selection of items that resonate with the Nordic welfare model. This enabled us to identify and retain those elements we expected would reflect worker engagement in this specific setting.

We selected CES items based on three criteria: (a) items reflecting the worker's perception of client engagement, (b) items adaptable to the worker perspective and (c) items relevant within a child and family welfare context. After a careful review of all 37 items, we selected a total of 10 that best represented key dimensions of engagement while avoiding conceptual overlap. Specifically, we included three items from the *investment* subscale (Items 5, 14 and 22), two from *working relationship* (Items 6 and 16), two from *mistrust* (Items 7 and 18), two from *receptivity* (Items 15 and 24) and one from the *expectancy* subscale (Item 36). This selection process laid the foundation for developing a preliminary worker engagement questionnaire, sensitive both to the professional perspective and the broader Nordic welfare context.

2.2 | Inspiration From Research on Worker Engagement in Canadian and Australian Child Protection Contexts

To further inform our framework, we drew primarily on research that explicitly addresses worker engagement, however within child protection contexts. In particular, we were inspired by the work of Gladstone and colleagues (Gladstone and Brown 2007; Gladstone et al. 2012, 2014), who are among the few researchers to have directly explored frontline caseworker engagement. A key strength of their approach lies in its emphasis on the relational dimensions of engagement, offering valuable insights into how workers experience their roles in building and sustaining engagement with families. We also integrated conceptual elements from Trotter (2002), whose research in the Australian child protection context emphasizes role clarification and collaborative problem-solving—both considered crucial components of effective worker engagement. In the following section, we outline how these studies informed the design and content of our worker engagement questionnaire tailored to a Nordic welfare context.

We began with the interview guide originally developed by Gladstone and Brown (2007), designed to capture elements contributing to positive working relationships between caseworkers and caregivers. This guide focused on mutual trust, collaboration and responsiveness—factors shown to predict positive case outcomes. In later work, Gladstone et al. (2012, 2014) adapted this guide to evaluate worker–parent engagement in Canadian child protection settings. Their revised approach included two components: (1) workers' perceptions of engagement, assessed through a modified version of Yatchmenoff's Client Engagement Scale tailored to the

TABLE 1 | Dimension of engagement.

Receptivity	Expectancy	Investment	Working relationship	Mistrust
Openness to receiving help, recognizing problems, and acknowledging the need for assistance.	Perception of benefit. Expectancy that help will be beneficial and improve the situation.	Active involvement and commitment to seeking and using help.	The quality of the relationship with the worker, characterized by good communication and reciprocity	Belief that the agency or worker may be manipulative or intend harm.

Note: Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), with negatively worded items reverse-scored. A higher total score indicates greater engagement.

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

worker's perspective, and (2) a 15-item worker engagement questionnaire based on the original Gladstone and Brown (2007) framework. This version assessed aspects such as the worker's perception of the client's caring attitude, effectiveness in caregiving, willingness to share information, problem-solving approach, respect for authority and compliance with case plans.

To further refine our questionnaire, we also incorporated insights from Trotter (2002), whose work emphasizes role clarification and structured problem-solving in statutory social work. Trotter identified five essential elements of effective practice: (1) clear communication of the caseworker's role, (2) active use of client-defined problems in planning interventions, (3) reinforcement of prosocial behaviour, (4) constructive confrontation and (5) maintenance of a collaborative relationship that balances authority and partnership. These principles helped broaden the conceptual foundation of our questionnaire.

2.2.1 | Zooming in on the Included Questions

This section provides a concrete overview of the specific questions included and their origins, building directly on the preceding presentation. From Gladstone et al.'s (2012) interview guide, we included 15 questions addressing dimensions such as clients' task follow-through, respect for the caseworker's authority and shared concern and problem solving—extending the original engagement framework to reflect worker engagement in statutory social work. For example (answered in relation to degree of agreement), *I think (name of parent) shares the same concerns that CPS had for her/his children*. To assess role clarification—how clearly caseworkers communicated the purpose of the intervention, their supportive role and how authority was exercised—we included four questions from the same guide. For example, *how often have you discussed with (name of parent) issues relating to how you might use authority?* Finally, we included 12 items assessing professional skills such as active listening, openness and honesty and praising parental efforts. For example, *to what extent do you praise (name of parent) for his/her efforts/ideas/achievements?* These questions were included to enrich the understanding of worker–client dynamics and were based on the work of Trotter (2002) and Gladstone et al. (2012). To enhance the scale, we added four questions:

- Two addressing caseworker responsiveness, specifically their consistency in keeping appointments and returning calls—elements previously identified as crucial for building trust and engagement (Gladstone et al. 2012, 2014). For example, *how often have you been able to keep/return phone calls to (name of parent) when arranged?*
- One inspired by, but not directly derived from, the client engagement literature, addressing the caseworker's self-perceived involvement in collaborative processes. For example (answered in relation to degree of agreement), *I am really involved in collaboration with this family.*
- One based on Danish research on client engagement (Villumsen 2018), capturing the notion of 'going the extra mile', which families have highlighted as particularly meaningful. For example (answered in relation to degree of agreement), *I am willing to* 'go an extra mile' *for this parent and their family.*

Together, these additions contributed to a more nuanced and contextually appropriate content of the worker engagement questionnaire.

Table 2 provides an overview of the questionnaire components, origin and number of questions. The full questionnaire is available in Table A1 in both English and Danish, where the specific focus of each item is also indicated.

2.3 | Translation, Cultural Adaptation and Adaption to Child and Family Welfare Context

The questions were translated into Danish using a structured and rigorous approach, adhering to the guidelines outlined by Hambleton et al. (1995) and the World Health Organization. This process involved four steps: (1) initial translation into Danish, (2) evaluation by an expert panel to ensure clarity, conceptual alignment, and adaptation to the child and family welfare context, (3) back-translation into English to verify accuracy and (4) pilot testing to address linguistic and cultural nuances and ensure contextual adaptation.

Following the initial translation, the draft version was reviewed by two experienced Danish child and family welfare managers to enhance the questionnaire's clarity and relevance within the Nordic statutory context. Particular attention was given to ensuring that the questionnaire reflected the professional realities of frontline caseworkers. Their feedback played a critical role in refining the wording of questions to ensure they resonated with everyday practice and aligned with the legal, institutional and cultural characteristics of Danish—and more broadly Nordic—statutory social work.

A native English speaker with Danish proficiency then conducted a back-translation to verify linguistic accuracy. This step identified minor discrepancies, which were subsequently resolved to enhance clarity and conceptual precision.

Finally, the revised questionnaire was piloted with three practicing caseworkers from statutory child and family welfare services. Each completed the questionnaire and provided detailed feedback on its clarity, relevance and practical usability. Their input helped identify redundancies, clarify ambiguous wording and refine overly broad questions. This practitioner-informed feedback further strengthened the questionnaire's alignment with real-world practice and confirmed its usability in a Nordic child welfare setting.

3 | Methods

3.1 | Interview Data

For any questionnaire to succeed, professionals tasked with using it must find it relevant and practical. To assess the relevance of the questions designed to capture worker engagement and explore the tool's usability and perceived value in practice,

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

we conducted eight individual interviews with caseworkers from three different municipalities in Denmark. These interviews provided critical insights into the questionnaire's relevance, applicability and potential to support reflective practice. All participants were ethnic Danes with a minimum of 3.5 years of formal education and training as social workers (see Table 3 for participant details). Interview durations ranged from 26 to 64 min, with an average length of 45 min.

The interviews explored participants' experiences with completing the worker engagement questionnaire, focusing on both its potential benefits and the challenges it posed in practice. The interviews were conducted by the corresponding author and a colleague, whereas the analysis was conducted solely by the corresponding author.

We transcribed all interviews verbatim and coded them using NVivo software. To analyse the qualitative data, we employed reflexive thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach, which involved systematically identifying and interpreting patterns within the data. Initial codes were developed based on the interview guide and the study's overarching aims.

TABLE 2 | Focus and content included in the worker engagement questionnaire.

Focus	Content	Origin	No. of questions	Original question language
Engagement as a concept	Receptivity, expectancy, investment, working relationship, mistrust and worker perception of client engagement	The Client Engagement Scale (Yatchmenoff 2005)	10	English
Worker engagement	Working relationship, shared goals, interview practices, purpose of intervention, and worker authority and involvement	Gladstone et al. (2012, 2014) Trotter (2002)	15	English
Worker skills	Role clarification, interview skills, relational skills and communicative skills	Trotter (2002) Gladstone et al. (2012, 2014)	16	English
Worker responsiveness	Keeping appointments, returning calls	Gladstone et al. (2012, 2014)	2	English
Self-assed involvement	Involvement in collaboration	Client engagement (Yatchmenoff 2005)	1	English
Self-assed engagement	'Going the extra mile'	Villumsen 2018	1	Danish

TABLE 3 | Description of the eight interviewed participants.

ID	Municipality	Gender	Age	Experience in social services with children and families
1	A (small)	Female	30	Eight years of experience in the field.
2	A (small)	Female	43	21 years of experience in the field. Both in the general area and the specialized area with children who have disabilities or functional impairments.
3	B (small)	Female	37	Five- and half-year experience in the field.
4	B (small)	Female	49	Four years of experience in the field working in the specialized area of children with disabilities.
5	B (small)	Female	53	Nine years of experience in the field.
6	C (large)	Female	39	Six months experience with children and families. However, experience from other areas within social work.
7	C (large)	Female	33	12 years of experience in the field.
8	C (large)	Female	34	Eight years of experience in the field as well as experience with young people in out-of-home care.

Note: Small: < 30 000; medium: 30 000–75 000; large: > 75 000.

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Following Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach, we clarified the study's assumptions upfront. We assumed that the worker engagement questionnaire would present both opportunities and challenges and that a detailed examination of its practical utility was necessary. To obtain a nuanced understanding of its use in practice, we asked caseworkers to reflect on at least two families from their current caseloads—selected to represent contrasting collaborative relationships. This design assumed that such contrasts would allow for deeper exploration of how the questionnaire functioned across diverse case contexts. The coding process proceeded iteratively, with codes being reviewed, refined and organized into two overarching themes capturing how caseworkers experienced and interpreted worker engagement in their everyday practice.

4 | Results: Insights From Qualitative Interviews on Worker Engagement

This section presents findings from the qualitative analysis of interviews with caseworkers, focusing on their experiences of completing the worker engagement questionnaire. The interviews explored their reflections on the questionnaire's content and perceived relevance, how it felt to complete and their thoughts on its potential usefulness and applicability in everyday practice.

The interviews provided valuable insights into how caseworkers perceived the questionnaire's relevance and utility in their professional practice. Two central themes emerged: *reflection on professional practice* and *suitability across family dynamics*. Together, these themes illustrate both the potential of the questionnaire to support reflective social work practice and areas where refinement could better address the needs of caseworkers and the families they serve.

4.1 | Theme 1 Reflection on Professional Practice

The first theme, reflection on professional practice, highlights how the questionnaire encouraged caseworkers to critically assess their own professional behaviour and interactions with families. This reflective process often centred on whether they were engaging effectively with families and whether some cases might benefit from being reassigned to a colleague better suited to the specific dynamics involved. The primary focus was on self-assessment, prompting caseworkers to evaluate their performance and how their actions influenced the collaborative relationship. One caseworker (5) described this reflective process:

> (...) it forced me to take a look at myself and the family in question and the dynamics between us

She elaborated further, emphasizing how the questionnaire could foster mutual understanding between workers and families:

> Well, it could potentially be a help to monitor yourself in relations to a specific issue and why you thought the way you did and why you took the actions you did. Well. (...) especially if you do this together with parents, with the family, then it could provide an increased understanding within all parties. In that sense; an increased understanding together and reflections together. All of which would potentially make a positive contribution to the working relationship as a whole (...). Also, the more knowledge one has about each other, and why you act and think the way you do ... In my view, it could potentially bring about something very positive for the relationship and the dynamic.

Caseworkers described using the questionnaire as a prompt for self-reflection, raising questions such as follows: Am I sufficiently clear about my authoritative role? How does the family perceive my communication style? Am I creating a sense of security in this collaborative relationship? This process also opened up discussions on aspects of the professional relationship that are often left unspoken, such as the nature and quality of collaboration itself. One participant (3) reflected:

> It could potentially be interesting. Because it [the collaborative relationship] is a thing we never address. It is a thing which is around somewhere. And then it is judged as kind of good or bad, right?

She continued:

> Yes. Well, I have never really thought about this thing on collaboration. I knew, that collaboration is necessary, right? But I have in fact never thought about it this way, at all. I know how important it is. That is all.

Finally, participants highlighted that using the worker and client engagement questionnaires in parallel could foster greater family participation and influence in the authority-driven statutory context. They saw the process as a potential means of giving families a stronger voice in their case, fostering dialogue about what families need from the collaborative relationship. This exchange, they suggested, could help balance inherent power asymmetries by allowing families to express their perspectives and influence how support is delivered. As one caseworker (8) described:

> It would be a way to share influence. Well, because it is exactly one of these things we can control. Yes. There are many ways in which we have the power but this is a place where they [the families] could regain some of that power.

By creating a structured opportunity for mutual reflection, the questionnaires were seen as potentially supporting more balanced relationships—where families feel heard and their perspectives help shape the intervention process more actively.

4.2 | Theme 2 Suitability Across Family Dynamics

The second theme, suitability across family dynamics, explores the appropriateness of using the questionnaire with different types of families. Caseworkers identified various family types and situations in which administering the client and worker engagement questionnaires could be inappropriate,

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

counterproductive or unlikely to provide an accurate representation of parental perspectives. For example, when working with families experiencing severe mental illness or overwhelming life crises, the questions were considered potentially insensitive or irrelevant. Similarly, in situations where the relationship between the family and the caseworker had become highly strained or conflictual, participants cautioned that the questionnaire might escalate tensions rather than foster collaboration.

In cases where contact between a caseworker and a family was minimal or infrequent, some participants expressed concern about whether they had sufficient insight to provide accurate assessments. These reflections emphasize the need to tailor the use of the questionnaire to the unique circumstances of each family, as a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach might not be appropriate. In addition, four caseworkers raised concerns about parental honesty when filling out a questionnaire they knew would later be discussed with their caseworker. One participant (1) explained:

> Exactly. (...) I am uncertain how honest they would be. Would they—also when the stakes are high—have the courage to score low, for instance, in case I would be upset and do something they don't want. (...) I could also doubt if they are able to elaborate further, if asked. But I think it would be cool.

Despite these concerns, several caseworkers expressed a desire to use both the client and worker engagement questionnaires in not only well-functioning collaborations but also in more complex cases. Two participants highlighted that administrative and procedural demands often overshadow relational work. In these situations, they saw the questionnaire as a useful reminder to prioritize the collaborative relationship, even in difficult collaborations. This feedback underscores the questionnaire's potential as both a reflective tool and a structured prompt to support worker-family dynamics, even in strained cases.

5 | Discussion

This study presents the development of a questionnaire designed to examine worker engagement, tailored specifically to the statutory child and family welfare services in a Nordic welfare setting. Drawing on existing research, it addresses key dimensions of worker engagement while accounting for the organizational and relational realities of frontline practice. The inclusion of qualitative interviews with caseworkers provided valuable insights into the questionnaire's perceived relevance, potential use, and limitations.

Findings suggest that the questionnaire holds potential as a tool to foster professional reflection and strengthen collaboration in statutory social work. Caseworkers noted that completing it encouraged them to critically assess their relationships with families, helping them stay focused on collaboration and maintain the working relationship as a central aspect of their practice. Participating caseworkers generally viewed the questionnaire positively, describing it as relevant and easy to use. However, one caseworker highlighted that timing and case developments could influence how the questionnaire is completed. For example, a recent reduction in visitation between parents and children in out-of-home placements might strain the collaborative relationship and affect how questions are answered. This observation underscores that collaborative relationships in statutory social work are inherently dynamic, particularly in mandated interventions where case circumstances can rapidly alter the dynamics. It is therefore essential to understand engagement—both among families and workers—as a dynamic and adaptive process (Dufour et al. 2016), shaped by ongoing relational, procedural and situational factors, rather than a fixed state.

If the questionnaire is to be implemented in practice, following further development and psychometrical validation, it is crucial that its use is not limited to a single measurement point. A one-time assessment may provide a useful snapshot, but it risks overlooking the subtle and significant relational shifts—both positive and negative—that often characterize casework with children and families facing adversity. Meaningfully capturing engagement requires repeated assessments over time to reflect these fluctuations and developments. Thus, longitudinal application in practice would be essential to ensure a more accurate and ethically grounded understanding of engagement as it evolves in real-world settings. The same rationale applies to the research context. To study worker engagement in a robust and ethically responsible way, a longitudinal approach is essential. One-time assessments are insufficient for adequately capturing the evolving character of engagement, particularly when research aims to understand how engagement interacts with intervention processes, organizational changes or outcomes. In both research and practice, then, recognizing and accommodating the temporal dimension of engagement is essential for generating meaningful insights and for guiding the informed development of social work with children and families facing adversity.

Building on the findings, the qualitative data also highlighted that caseworkers emphasized that the worker engagement questionnaire should be used thoughtfully, as it may not be appropriate for all cases or family situations. They highlighted that in circumstances involving significant family distress, such as severe mental health challenges, overwhelming life circumstances or strained relationships with social services, the tool could risk being perceived as poorly timed or even counterproductive. In such cases, its structured format might feel intrusive rather than supportive. This feedback suggests, first and foremost, that further development and testing of the questionnaire are needed but also that the questionnaire may be better suited for selective use rather than as a mandatory tool applied systematically across all collaborations. Thus, the questions may be most valuable as a means to foster reflection and open dialogue between caseworkers and families. From an ethical standpoint, such selectivity in application is also necessary to avoid placing undue pressure on vulnerable families and professionals or unintentionally disrupting an already fragile collaborative relationship. Depending on continued development and psychometrical validation of the questionnaire, the most appropriate initial use of the questionnaire may lie in research rather than practice. In research settings, it could potentially be used to trace patterns of engagement over time in larger samples of families; examine how worker and client engagement relates to intervention outcomes; explore associations between worker and client

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE - The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

engagement, as demonstrated in previous studies (Damiani-Taraba et al. 2017; Gladstone et al. 2014; Cheng and Lo 2020); and to examine associations with organizational factors such as staff turnover. Over time, however, such research may help build a stronger foundation for the questionnaire's informed and context-sensitive application in practice, particularly within the complex field of social work with children and families facing adversity.

In addition to these practice-oriented considerations, attention must also be given to a wider issue relating to the validity of self-reported assessment, as this is a broader challenge across fields where subjective experience is central. Self-reports may be susceptible to social desirability, recall bias and situational influences (Lucas 2018; Paulhus and Vazire 2007). Clients may moderate their responses due to fear of stigma or repercussions, whereas caseworkers may worry that honest answers could reflect poorly on their professionalism or job security. Although observational assessments often are considered more objective, they present their own limitations, including observer bias, observer drift and high resource demands (Girard and Cohn 2016), and, to our knowledge, no validated observational tools exist for assessing worker engagement in statutory child and family social work. In this context, the collaborative relationship between caseworker and client is not a static construct that can be assessed independently but a lived, negotiated interaction. As in research on subjective well-being, if we seek to understand how people experience a relationship, a system, or a service, their perception becomes the construct of interest (Lucas 2018). Even if self-reports are of a subjective character, they reveal how collaboration is experienced—and these perceptions shape trust, cooperation and outcomes. Thus, although they must be used with care, self-report tools remain essential for capturing the lived dynamics of engagement in practice.

5.1 | Limitations

This study represents an initial step in the development of a questionnaire designed to capture worker engagement in statutory social work. Although qualitative findings suggest that the tool holds relevance and potential value in practice, it has yet to undergo rigorous psychometric validation and should therefore not be put into use at this point in time. Further refinement, large-scale empirical testing and assessment of its reliability, construct validity and sensitivity are essential to establish the questionnaire as a robust and credible measure of worker engagement.

A second limitation is that the questionnaire has not yet been examined in relation to broader organizational factors, such as work climate or professional well-being. Social work is a demanding profession, often associated with difficult working conditions, high case severity, elevated stress levels and a heightened risk of burnout (Kothari et al. 2021; Kim and Stoner 2008; Hamama 2012; Lloyd et al. 2002). Moreover, higher compassion satisfaction among caseworkers is positively associated with the use of engagement skills, whereas higher levels of burnout and secondary traumatic stress are negatively associated with their use (Clark et al. 2024). These factors inevitably influence caseworkers' ability to perform their roles effectively, likely affecting both their own engagement and their capacity to foster engagement in clients. Therefore, future work on worker engagement should include background questions assessing professional well-being—covering job satisfaction, burnout, stress and work climate—as these elements provide an essential framework for interpreting worker engagement and for understanding the broader conditions under which social workers operate. Without accounting for such contextual factors, worker engagement scores risk being interpreted in isolation from the institutional and relational complexities that characterize frontline social work. Future research should thus aim to examine how structural conditions interact with and potentially influence responses related to worker engagement.

6 | Conclusion and Future Directions

This study suggests that the worker engagement questionnaire holds promise as a tool to support reflection and improve collaboration in statutory social work. However, the findings also highlight potential challenges and unintended consequences, emphasizing the need for further development, testing and psychometrical validation. Ethical considerations are key, particularly in deciding whether the tool should be used routinely or selectively, and whether its primary value lies in research or practice. Continued involvement of both caseworkers and clients will be essential to ensure the questionnaire is both meaningful and usable in real-world settings. With further refinement, it may offer valuable insights to enhance service quality and promote more collaborative social work relationships.

Acknowledgements

We extend our heartfelt thanks to the leaders and social workers who participated in the expert group, pilot testing and interviews. We are especially grateful to Gladstone and colleagues for generously sharing their interview materials, which significantly supported this study. Our sincere thanks also go to Amalie Bøg Rasmussen for her invaluable assistance with the setup and distribution of the questionnaire and her contributions to the initial coding of the qualitative data.

Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Danish Center for Social Science Research's Research Ethics Committee (Journal No. 2024/3).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

References

Altman, J. 2008a. "A Study of Engagement in Neighborhood Based Child Welfare Services." *Research on Social Work Practice* 18: 555–564.

Altman, J. 2008b. "Engaging Families in Child Welfare Services: Worker Versus Client Perspectives." *Child Welfare* 87: 41–61.

Bekaert, S., E. Paavilainen, H. Schecke, et al. 2021. "Family Members' Perspectives of Child Protection Services, A Metasynthesis of the Literature." *Children and Youth Services Review* 128: 1–13.

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2019. "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4: 589–597.

Charest-Belzile, D., S. Drapeau, and H. Ivers. 2020. "Parental Engagement in Child Protection Services: A Multidimensional, Longitudinal and Interactive Framework." *Children and Youth Services Review* 116: 105162.

Cheng, T. C., and C. C. Lo. 2016. "Linking Worker-Parent Working Alliance to Parent Progress in Child Welfare: A Longitudinal Analysis." *Children and Youth Services Review* 71: 10–16.

Cheng, T. C., and C. C. Lo. 2020. "Collaborative Alliance of Parent and Child Welfare Caseworker." *Child Maltreatment* 25, no. 2: 152–161.

Clark, S. L., B. Miller, B. A. Akin, et al. 2024. "Examining Associations Between Child Welfare Workforce Well-Being and Utilization of Casework Skills With Children and Families." *Child Abuse & Neglect* 155: 106964.

Damiani-Taraba, G., G. Dumbrill, J. Gladstone, A. Koster, B. Leslie, and M. Charles. 2017. "The Evolving Relationship Between Casework Skills, Engagement, and Positive Case Outcomes in Child Protection: A Structural Equation Model." *Children and Youth Services Review* 79: 456–462.

Dufour, S., C. Lavergne, J. Gaudet, and D. Couture. 2016. "Protecting Visible Minority Children: Family–Caseworker Dynamics and Protective Authority Intervention Strategies." *Canadian Psychology/ Psychologie Canadienne* 57, no. 4: 356–364. https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000078.

Gilbert, N. 2007. *Combatting Child Abuse: International Perspectives and Trends*. Oxford University Press.

Gilbert, N., N. Parton, and M. Skivenes. 2011. *Child Protection Systems: International Trends and Orientations*. Oxford University Press.

Girard, J. M., and J. F. Cohn. 2016. "A Primer on Observational Measurement." *Assessment* 23, no. 4: 404–413.

Gladstone, J. W., and R. A. Brown. 2007. "Grandparents' and Social Workers' Experiences with the Child Welfare System: A Case for Mutual Resources." *Children and Youth Services Review* 29, no. 11: 1439–1453.

Gladstone, J., G. Dumbrill, B. Leslie, A. Koster, M. Young, and A. Ismaila. 2012. "Looking at Engagement and Outcome From the Perspectives of Child Protection Workers and Parents." *Children and Youth Services Review* 34, no. 1: 112–118.

Gladstone, J., G. Dumbrill, B. Leslie, A. Koster, M. Young, and A. Ismaila. 2014. "Understanding Worker–Parent Engagement in Child Protection Casework." *Children and Youth Services Review* 44: 56–64.

Gockel, A., M. Russell, and B. Harris. 2008. "Recreating Family." *Child Welfare* 87, no. 6: 91–114.

Greve, B. 2007. "What Characterise the Nordic Welfare State Model." *Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 2: 43–51.

Hamama, L. 2012. "Burnout in Social Workers Treating Children as Related to Demographic Characteristics, Work Environment, and Social Support." *Social Work Research* 36, no. 2: 113–125.

Hambleton, R. K., P. F. Merenda, and C. D. Spielberger. 1995. *Adapting Educational and Psychological Tests for Cross-Cultural Assessment*. Lawrence Earlbaum Associates Publishers.

Kemp, S. P., M. O. Marcenko, S. J. Lyons, and J. M. Kruzich. 2014. "Strength-Based Practice and Parental Engagement in Child Welfare Services: An Empirical Examination." *Children and Youth Services Review* 47: 27–35.

Kim, H., and M. Stoner. 2008. "Burnout and Turnover Intention Among Social Workers: Effects of Role Stress, Job Autonomy and Social Support." *Administration in Social Work* 32, no. 3: 5–25.

Kothari, B. H., K. D. Chandler, A. Waugh, K. K. McElvaine, J. Jaramillo, and S. Lipscomb. 2021. "Retention of Child Welfare Caseworkers: The Role of Case Severity and Workplace Resources." *Children and Youth Services Review* 126: 106039.

Lloyd, C., R. King, and L. Chenoweth. 2002. "Social Work, Stress and Burnout: A Review." *Journal of Mental Health* 11, no. 3: 255–265.

Lucas, R. E. 2018. Reevaluating the Strengths and Weaknesses of Self-Report Measures of Subjective Well-Being. 1–12. In: Diener, E., Oishi, S., and Tay, L. (Eds.). *Handbook of Well-Being*. Salt Lake City, UT: DEF Publishers. nobascholar.com.

Paulhus, D. L., & Vazire, S. (2007). The Self-Report Method. Robins, R. W., Fraley, R. C., and Krueger, R. F. (Eds.). (2009). *Handbook of Research Methods in Personality Psychology*, 1(2007), 224–239. Guilford Press. New York.

Pösö, T., M. Skivenes, and A.-D. Hestbæk. 2014. "Child Protection Systems Within the Danish, Finnish and Norwegian Welfare States—Time for A Child Centric Approach?" *European Journal of Social Work* 17, no. 4: 475–490.

Samsonsen, V., and E. Willumsen. 2015. "Narratives From Parents in England and Norway: Power and Emotions in Child Protection Assessments." *Journal of Comparative Social Work* 10, no. 1: 6–30.

Tembo, M. J., and I. Studsrød. 2019. "Parents' Emotional Experiences of Their Contact With the Child Welfare Services: A Synthesis of Previous Research—A Research Review." *Nordic Social Work Research* 9, no. 2: 184–198.

Trotter, C. 2002. "Worker Skill and Client Outcome in Child Protection." *Child Abuse Review* 11, no. 1: 38–50.

Villumsen, A. M. 2018. "Familiernes stemme om helhedsorienteret socialt arbejde [Family voices on holistic social work]." In *Helhedsorienteret socialt arbejde med udsatte familier [Holistic Social work with families at risk]*, edited by I A. M. Villumsen, 175–190. Akademisk Forlag.

Villumsen, A. M., A. B. Rasmussen, and L. Berg. 2025. "Fostering Family Engagement: Perspectives from Families and Their Social Workers in Danish Child and Family Welfare Services." *British Journal of Social Work* 00: 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf084.

Xu, Y., H. Ahn, and C. L. Bright. 2017. "Family Involvement Meetings: Engagement, Facilitation, and Child and Family Goals." *Children and Youth Services Review* 79: 37–43.

Yatchmenoff, D. K. 2005. "Measuring Client Engagement from the Client's Perspective in Nonvoluntary Child Protective Services." *Research on Social Work Practice* 15, no. 2: 84–96.

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Appendix

TABLE A1 | Full questionnaire.

	UK	DK	Focus area
1	I think (name of parent) really wants to make use of the services that CAS is providing her/him.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder virkelig gerne vil tage imod den hjælp, som Familieafdelingen tilbyder ham/hende.	1
2	I think (name of parent) finds it difficult to work with me.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder synes, at det er svært at samarbejde med mig.	1
3	I think (name of parent) believes that CAS will use what s/he says to make her/him look bad.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder forventer, at uanset hvad han/hun siger, så fordrejer Familieafdelingen det.	1
4	I think (name of parent) is not just going through the motions. S/he is really involved in working with CAS.	Denne forælder involverer sig virkelig i samarbejdet med Familieafdelingen. Jeg tror ikke, at han/hun bare lader som om.	1
5	I think (name of parent) would say that s/he and I agree about what is best for her/his child.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder vil sige, at han/hun og jeg er enige om, hvad der er bedst for barnet.	1
6	I think (name of parent) feels that s/he can trust CAS to be fair and to see her/his side of things.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder føler, at han/hun kan stole på, at Familieafdelingen er retfærdig og forsøger at se tingene fra hendes/hans side.	1
7	I think (name of parent) would say that what CAS wants her/him to do is the same as what s/he wants.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder vil sige, at det han/hun selv ønsker, er det samme, som Familieafdelingen vil have ham/hende til at gøre.	1
8	I think (name of parent) would say that there were definitely some problems in her/his family that CAS saw.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder vil sige, at der helt sikkert var. nogle udfordringer i hans/hendes familie, som Familieafdelingen og jeg fik øje på.	1
9	I think (name of parent) shares the same concerns that CPS has for her/his children.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder deler de bekymringer, som Familieafdelingen har vedrørende hans/hendes barn.	1
10	I think (name of parent) would say that CAS is helping her/his family get stronger.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder vil sige, at Familieafdelingen hjælper hans/hendes familie til at blive stærkere.	1
11	I think (name of parent) is able to provide effective care to his/her child (ren).	Jeg tror, at denne forælder er i stand til at yde tilstrækkelig omsorg for hans/hendes barn	2
12	I think (name of parent) would call me if s/he needed assistance with her/his child.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder vil ringe til mig, hvis han/hun havde brug for hjælp med sit barn.	2
13	I think (name of parent) would tell me things about her/his child (ren) that I need to know.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder vil fortælle mig ting om hans/hendes barn, som jeg har behov for at vide.	2
14	I think that (name of parent) respects the expertise and authority of the CAS.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder respekterer Familieafdelingens ekspertise og autoritet.	2
15	I think (name of parent) and I are working towards the same goals.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder og jeg arbejder hen imod de samme mål.	2
16	I think (name of parent) is able to listen to me.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder formår at lytte til mig.	2
17	I think (name of parent) follows up on things her/him to do.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder følger op på de ting, som vi har aftalt, at han/hun skal gøre.	2
18	I think that (name of parent) is able to focus on the issue at hand rather than go off on tangents.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder er i stand til at fokusere på den aktuelle problemstilling fremfor at gå ud af en tangent.	2
19	I think (name of parent) shares the same concerns that CAS has for her/his children.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder deler de bekymringer, som Familieafdelingen har vedrørende hans/hendes barn.	2
20	It's hard for me to work with (name of parent).	Det er svært for mig at samarbejde med denne forælder.	2
21	I feel like (name of parent) can see my side of things.	Jeg oplever, at denne forælder kan se min side af tingene.	2
22	I find that (name of parent) is friendly and easy to talk to.	Jeg oplever, at denne forælder er venlig og nem at tale med.	2
23	I think that (name of parent) trusts me.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder stoler på mig.	2
24	I think that (name of parent) understands why CAS is involved with her/his family.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder forstår, hvorfor Familieafdelingen er involveret i hans/hendes familie.	2

(Continues)

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

TABLE A1 | (Continued)

	UK	DK	Focus area
25	I believe (name of parent) is only telling me things s/he thinks I want to hear.	Jeg tror, at denne forælder kun fortæller mig ting, som han/hun tror, jeg gerne vil høre.	2
26	I am really involved in collaboration with this parent[a]	Jeg involverer mig virkelig i samarbejdet med denne forælder.	5
27	I am willing to 'go an extra mile' for this parent and their family[a]	Jeg vil gerne gøre en ekstra indsats for denne forælder og hans/hendes familie.	5
	How often:	Hvor ofte har du:	
28	Have you talked to (name of parent) about part of your role being to provide help/support?	Talt med denne forælder om, hvad din rolle er i forhold til at sikre familiens hjælp/støtte?	3
29	Have you discussed with (name of parent) issues relating to how you might use authority?	Talt med denne forælder om din myndighedsrolle, og hvad den indebærer?	3
30	Have you spoken with (name of parent) about what was negotiable and what was not negotiable with CAS?	Talt med denne forælder om, hvad der er til forhandling i Familieafdelingen, og hvad der ikke er?	3
31	Have you discussed the purpose of CAS intervention with (name of parent)?	Talt med denne forælder om, hvad formålet er med den hjælp, Familieafdelingen tilbyder?	3
	To what extent do you:	I hvilken grad gør du følgende:	
32	i. Praise (name of parent) for his/her efforts/ideas/achievements	Roser forældrene for hans/hendes indsats, idéer og resultater.	3
33	ii. Praise (name of parent) for acknowledging his/her difficulties	Roser forældrene for at anerkende deres egne udfordringer.	3
34	iii. Provide (name of parent) with reassurance	Giver forældrene en følelse af tryghed.	3
35	Have you given information or demonstrated ways in which (name of parent) could approach problems differently?	Informerer om eller anviser måder, hvorpå forældrene kan håndtere problemer på en anden måde.	3
	How often:	Hvor ofte har du:	
36	Have you been able to keep your appointments with (name of parent) on time?	Været i stand til at overholde dine aftaler med forældrene.	4
37	Have you been able to make/return phone calls to (name of parent) when arranged?	Været i stand til at foretage/returnere telefonopkald med forældrene som aftalt.	4
	How skilled would you say you are at the following when working with (name of parent):	Hvor god vil du sige, at du er til følgende, når du skal samarbejde med forældrene?	
38	i. Listening to her/his views/problems	At lytte til hans/hendes perspektiv/problemer.	3
39	iii. Recognizing good things in his/her parenting Skilled	At anerkende de gode ting i hans/hendes forældreevne.	3
40	vi. Including him/her in planning	At inkludere ham/hende i tilrettelæggelsen af hjælpen.	3
41	vii. Being caring and supportive	At være omsorgsfuld og støttende.	3
42	Viii. Being open and honest	At være åben og ærlig.	3
43	xiii. Understanding what s/he is going through	At være forstående overfor, hvad han/hun går igennem.	3
44	xvii. Being nonjudgemental	At være ikke-fordømmende.	3
45	xviii. Being available when needed	At være tilgængelig, når familien har brug for det	3

Note: Focus areas: (1) engagement as a concept, (2) worker engagement, (3) worker skills, (4) worker responsiveness, and (5) Self-assessed engagement.
[a]Translated for the purpose of this appendix.

13652206, 0, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.70039 by Therese Moeller - VIVE – The Danish Center for Social Science Research , Wiley Online Library on [05/11/2025]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License