**Parental consent to support from the Swedish child welfare**

Lisa Sandelin, Sara Thunberg & Anna Petersén

**Abstract**

For a child to receive support from Child Welfare Services (CWS) in Sweden, the parents' consent is usually required. Many children who are victims of child abuse by a parent are denied support from CWS because the parents refuse support. The present study investigates factors that relate to parental consent to support offered from CWS and if the use of the model *After the Child Forensic Interview* (ACFI, sw. *Efter barnförhöret*) has any effects on parental consent through early support during the investigative stage. The material consists of CWS investigations regarding child abuse. A quantitative approach will be used to analyze differences between cases where parents consented to support and cases where parents refused support, as well as which factors are most strongly related to parental consent to support.

**Introduction**

Child abuse can lead to both short- and long-term consequences for the child. In addition to physical damage, it can lead to, for example, poorer school results, mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and behavioral problems later in life (Gilbert et al., 2009). In Sweden, Child Welfare Services (CWS) have the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that children who have been victims of child abuse get the support and help they need. The support can be directed directly towards the child, or to the parents with the aim of improving the child's situation. Notable, for a child to receive support from CWS, the parents' consent is generally required (Social Services Act, 2001:453). A study shows that about half of the parents who were offered support from Swedish CWS for themselves and/or their children refused (Heimer & Pettersson, 2023). Consequently, many children who are considered by the CWS to need support for themselves or through improved parenting are denied this.

Previous research has studied parents' engagement in the CWS. According to Ingram et al. (2015) the concept of engagement in the CWS includes “parents' acceptance of the need for help, attendance or availability in service, retention, compliance, and cooperation with the service provider, and/or collaboration and adherence to service plans” (p. 140). Parental engagement and involvement in the support that CWS provides is an important component for the outcome of the intervention and for reducing continued exposure to violence and repeated reports to CWS (Gladstone et al., 2012), at the same time, it is difficult to get and maintain parental engagement (Schelbe et al., 2018).

A few studies have found *parental factors* that can be related to parental engagement in the CWS. Darlington et al. (2010) found that parents who understand their child's needs and who are willing to change according to those needs are more likely to engage. Factors that have been shown to hinder parental engagement include parents' negative expectations of CWS and their negative feelings regarding the initial meeting with CWS (Schreiber et al., 2013), parental depression (Sheppard, 2002), or that the offered support do not fit the family's unique circumstances (Vikander et al., 2023).

Considerably more studies have found factors related to the CWS and the child welfare worker (CWW) that can be related to parents' engagement in the CWS. The relationship between the CWW and the parents has been shown to be of importance to the engagement of the parents (Gladstone et al., 2012). The relationship is bidirectional, engaged CWWs leads to engaged parents, and vice versa. For CWW to be able to create trusting relationships, time and resources are required. An excessively high workload leads to less time for case planning and less time to build relationships with the family, which in turn can lead to less committed parents (Darlington et al., 2010). In line with that, parents feel that receiving support, especially emotional support in the meeting with CWS is important for them to get engaged (Darlington et al., 2010; Schreiber et al., 2013). According to the parents, the experience of the worker is an important factor, several reasons are given for this, but the main one is that parents believe that an experienced worker can better understand the parents' situation and how to deal with it (Gladstone et al., 2012). Also, the fact that the child is not taken into care but is allowed to stay with his family seems to increase the engagement of the parents (Popoviciu, 2013).

Power is a factor that can influence parental engagement in several ways. The power that CWS holds can be an obstacle when it comes to engaging parents. CWWs find it difficult to engage parents within the framework of the statutory CWS coercive power. Another aspect of power is the parents' perception of the power held by CWS. Parents may perceive CWS as intimidating, which may hinder parental involvement. The parents' perception may in turn be influenced by their previous experiences with CWS (Darlington et al., 2010). CWW believes that their dual responsibility, of both investigating the family and providing them with support, hinders parental engagement (Haely et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2013), while CWWs who do not have statutory power over the family find it easier to engage parents (Darlington et al., 2010).

Gladstone et al. (2012) observed a trend of parent engagement differing depending on CWWs assessment of the severity of the case. Parents were more engaged in cases that were “not severe” and more engaged in cases that were “extremely severe”, however, the result was not significant, which is why it would need to be studied further.

Based on the research presented, parental engagement is of importance to make sure that interventions are both consented to and successful, with the relationship between the family and CWW can be a key factor to motivate parental engagement. Parental consent can be seen as part of the concept of parental engagement. However, parental consent in itself has not been studied previously to understand parental engagement during the investigation process and in the support efforts that are given. After the Child Forensic Interview (ACFI) is a model used in almost half of all municipalities in Sweden, an underlying assumption, which emerges in the program theoretical study of the model, is that ACFI can improve parental engagement (Petersén & Thunberg, 2022). ACFI is a model for support and information for children and parents which begins immediately after a child has been to a forensic interview due to suspected child abuse by a parent (Elfström, Landberg & Olofsson, 2017). It includes several factors that have been shown to increase parents' propensity to engage in CWS, including early intervention, CWW who do not have dual responsibilities by both investigating and offering support to the family (Haely et al., 2012; Ney et al., 2013), and support and information during the investigation process (Darlington et al., 2010; Schreiber et al., 2013). One of the purposes of the model is to inform about what support is available and to encourage parents to consent to support. Family social workers who work with the model also believe that parents who have received ACFI are more likely to consent to support (Petersén et al., under review).

**Aim**

The present study investigates factors that relate to parental consent to support offered from CWS and if the use of ACFI has any effects on parental consent through early support during the investigative stage. More specifically, we will examine differences between cases where the parents consented to support and cases where the parents refused support, as well as which factors are most strongly related to parental consent to support.

**Method**

This is a retrospective study with a quantitative design. It is carried out within the framework of the project *After the child investigative interview – evolution of an early intervention from the social services in cases of child abuse*. This study received ethical approval by the Swedish Ethical Review Board, Dnr. 2022-00486-01, 2023-00723-02.

**Materials and Procedure**

The material in the present study consists of investigations from the Swedish CWS. The inclusion criteria were, (I) suspicion of child abuse by a parent, (II) completed police interview of the child (III) the child returns home to the parents after the police interview, and (IV) the investigation is no older than 2018. In total, (goal 200) investigations were collected. The investigations come from X different Swedish municipalities. The different municipalities have contributed with between X and X investigations each.

All investigations that were included in the study were carried out according to the BBIC (The needs of the child) structure. BBIC is a nationally uniform structure for the handling, implementation, and follow-up of individual cases in the CWS (National board of health and welfare). In the investigation, an assessment of the child's needs is made. The needs are divided into three parts 1) family and environment, 2) the child's development, and 3) parents' ability. Areas and sub-areas are linked to each of the parts. Family and environment include the areas current family situation, family history, housing work and finances, and social network and integration. The child's development includes the areas health, education, emotions and behavior, and social relationships. Parents ability includes the areas basic care, stimulation and guidance, emotional availability, and safety. Each of the investigations does not cover all these areas. The CWW makes an assessment regarding which areas are relevant in the specific case.

To gain access to the investigations, information from Children´s Welfare Foundation Sweden (Stiftelsen Allmänna Barnhuset) about which municipalities use ACFI was used. The municipalities received a request to participate in the study via email. The municipalities that agreed to be part of the study were asked to select investigations that meet the inclusion criteria. The authors have then collected the investigations by visiting the municipalities concerned. The investigations have been anonymized before they were taken from the social service office.

To extract data from the investigations, they were carefully read through, and current variables were quantified and transferred to the statistical analysis program SPSS. The fact that not all investigations include information on all areas has affected the coding work. Some variables can easily be read out in all investigations, while some are difficult to identify or completely missing. In cases where the variables have been difficult to interpret, two authors have read the investigation to ensure a correct assessment.

**Variables.** The variables can be divided into four groups: background variables, family-related variables, characteristic of violence, and investigative practice.Background variables such as *Age of the parents,* *Age* and *Gender of the child*, and *Geographical context of the family’s place of residence* is specified in the investigation. The geographical context of the family’s place of residence variable was created based on the municipality where the investigation was carried out because the family is always investigated in the municipality where they live. The variable has been divided into three types of municipalities: rural municipalities, mixed municipalities, and metropolitan municipalities (The Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth).

*Parents’ consent to support from the CWS* has been coded as support offered and accepted, support offered but refused and support not offered. Parental consent can be difficult to interpret. The investigation always ends with a decision on support or no support, but if support is not offered, it may be because CWS believes that there is no need or that CWS believes that the parents are not receptive to support. In cases where the investigation has ended with a decision of no support, but it appears in the investigation that CWS believes there is a need for support, the code support offered but refused has been used. *Parents' relationship* has been divided into three types living together, separated with joint custody, sole custody. The family's previous experience of CWS has been coded as yes or no. In the investigations, this is often stated under the heading: CWS's prior knowledge of the family. *The parents' recognition of the violence* has been coded as yes or no. In some cases, it is difficult to interpret the parents' recognition. The cases where the parents admit that they have problems but still deny violence have been coded as no. Only cases where the parents acknowledge the violence have been coded as yes. *Disability in the child* has been coded yes, suspected or no. The code yes has been entered if it appears in the investigation that the child has a diagnosed disability, the code suspected has been entered if it appears in the investigation that the parents suspect that the child has a disability. Four variables have been used to measure social problems in the parents: *Mental illness in a parent*, *poverty, alcohol or drug abuse*, and *lack of social support*. All have been coded yes or no. The code yes on the mental illness variable has been entered if, for example, a parent is depressed. On the variable poverty, yes has been entered if, for example, the family has income support. Alcohol or drug abuse can appear, for example, because the abuser has previously been in contact with social services due to their addiction. If the family lacks a social network, it is usually stated that they have no relatives or close friends nearby. Two variables have been used to measure social problems in the child: *Problems at school* and *Problems with peer relationship*. They have been coded as yes or no. For the code yes on the variable problems at school, it can be stated, for example, the child does not meet the goals at school or that he has a lot of unauthorized absences. For the code yes on problems with peer relationship, it can be stated, for example, that the child has difficulty understanding social codes or that he/she often gets into fights.

Three variables have been used to study the character of the violence: *Repeated violence* has been coded yes or no, *Type of violence* has been coded: physical, psychical, neglect, witnessed violence, several types, and *Patterns of violence* has been coded: violence against the child, violence against the child + siblings, violence against the child + partner, violence against the child + sibling + partner. All information on violence is based on what appears in the investigation, even if the parents do not confirm the information.

Investigation practice includes the variables: *Number of meetings CWS had with the child, Number of meetings CWS had with the parents*, and *Number of reference persons contacted during the investigation*, and *Have received ACFI*. Have received ACFI have been coded as documented or not documented.

**Analyses**

First, we analyzed differences between cases where parents consented to support from CWS and cases where parents refused support. Cases where the family was not offered any support were excluded from this analyzes as these where not relevant. The nominal variables were analyzed using Chi-square test and odds ratio with a 95% confidence interval, effect size was measured using phi. The range variables were analyzed using (independent t-test, ANOVA or Welch´s test).

To measure whether parental social problems are related to parental consent to support, a composite variable was created by combining the variables that measures parental social problems (mental illness, poverty, alcohol or drug abuse, and lack of social network). The same procedure was used to measure children's social problems, the variables problems at school and problems with friends were combined into a composite variable.

Second, the variables found to have a significant relationship with parental consent to support were introduced into a logistic regression to measure the relative importance of the variables on parents’ consent to support from CWS.

For all tests in this study, a significant level of p < .05 was used. All analyzes were performed in IBM SPSS (version 28).

**References**

Darlington, Y., Healy, K., & Feeney, J. A. (2010). Challenges in implementing participatory practice in child protection: A contingency approach. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *32*(7), 1020–1027. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2010.03.030>

Elfström, H., Landberg, Å. & Olofsson, G. (2017*). Efter barnförhöret – En modell för att ge stöd och information till barn och föräldrar vid misstanke om barnmisshandel*. Stockholm: Stiftelsen Allmänna Barnhuset.

Gilbert, R., Widom, C. S., Browne, K., Fergusson, D., Webb, E., & Janson, S. (2009). Child Maltreatment 1 Burden and consequences of child maltreatment in high-income countries. *The Lancet (British Edition)*, *373*(9657), 68–81. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(08)61706-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736%2808%2961706-7)

Gladstone, J., Dumbrill, G., Leslie, B., Koster, A., Young, M., & Ismaila, A. (2012). Looking at engagement and outcome from the perspectives of child protection workers and parents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *34*(1), 112–118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.09.003>

Healy, K., Darlington, Y., & Yellowlees, J. (2012). Family participation in child protection practice: an observational study of family group meetings. *Child & Family Social Work*, *17*(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2011.00767.x>

Heimer, M. & Pettersson, C. (2023) The unfinished democratisation of family service systems: parental consent and children’s viewpoints on receiving support in child and family welfare in Sweden, *European Journal of Social Work, 26*:2, 310-322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2117137>

Ingram, S. D., Cash, S. J., Oats, R. G., Simpson, A., & Thompson, R. W. (2015). Development of an evidence-informed in-home family services model for families and children at risk of abuse and neglect. *Child & Family Social Work*, *20*(2), 139–148. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12061>

Ney, T., Stoltz, J.-A., & Maloney, M. (2013). Voice, power and discourse: Experiences of participants in family group conferences in the context of child protection. *Journal of Social Work : JSW*, *13*(2), 184–202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017311410514>

Petersén, A. & Thunberg, S. (2022). Efter barnförhöret: En programteoretisk analys. Örebro:Örebro universitet (Working Papers and Reports Social work 26).

Platt, D. (2012). Understanding parental engagement with child welfare services: an integrated model. *Child & Family Social Work*, *17*(2), 138–148. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00828.x>

Popoviciu, S., Birle, D., Popoviciu, I., & Bara, D. (2013). Social workers’ perspectives on parental engagement when children are at risk in Romanian society. *Child & Family Social Work*, *18*(3), 354–364. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.13652206.2012.00851.x>

Schelbe, L., Radey, M., Holtrop, K., Canto, A. I., & McWey, L. M. (2018). Recruitment and Retention in a Parenting Intervention: A Case Study with Parents Aging Out of the Child Welfare System. *Journal of Social Service Research*, *44*(4), 557–568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01488376.2018.1477701>

Schreiber, J. C., Fuller, T., & Paceley, M. S. (2013). Engagement in child protective services: Parent perceptions of worker skills. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*(4), 707 715. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.01.018>

Sheppard, M. (2002). Depressed Mothers’ Experience of Partnership in Child and Family Care. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *32*(1), 93–112. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/32.1.93>

Social services act. (2001:453). *Socialtjänstlag*, SoL.

Toros, K., DiNitto, D. M., & Tiko, A. (2018). Family engagement in the child welfare system: A scoping review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *88*, 598–607. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.03.011>