

**Chapter 4: Children's and young people's participation
within child welfare and child protection services: State of
the art**

Abstract

This state-of-the-art literature review, based on a literature search of multiple scientific bibliographic databases, aims to shed a light on what is known about barriers and factors facilitating child participation within the child protection and child welfare services from both children's and social workers' perspectives. The personal relationship between the child and the social worker is mentioned as one of the most important facilitators for participation, though multiple barriers in creating this relationship are demonstrated by both children and case managers and social workers. In studies, children say they should always participate while social workers and case managers identify many situations where, according to them, participation is inappropriate. Professionals' objections to participation mainly stem from the sociocultural image of children as vulnerable and in need of adult protection, and a lack of understanding of what participation actually entails. Interventions to strengthen participation should be directed at making social workers and case managers aware that children are knowledgeable social actors.

4.1 Introduction

The right for children and young people to participate in decisions affecting their lives was established in articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified in 1989. Since then, children's and young people's participation in child welfare and protection services has been the focus of research, policy development and legislation. The Convention determines that children must be heard and that their views have to be taken into account in accordance with age and maturity (Donnelly, 2010; Vis & Thomas, 2009). Research first focused on whether children and young people had a say in decisions about their lives. This was followed by a growing awareness of the benefits of children's participation in such decisions, an awareness which has been increasingly recognized in legislation. Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of participation for the development of children, especially children in care. For example, participation in decisions about their lives helps children feel connected and committed to the decisions that are taken (Woolfson et al., 2010), it may lead to an increase in self-esteem (Vis et al., 2011), and is associated with an increased feeling of mastery and control (Bell, 2002; McLeod, 2007; Munro, 2001; Leeson, 2007). Additionally, by taking children's views, wishes and expectations into account, interventions might be more responsive and therefore more effective (Barnes, 2012; McLeod, 2007). Although there is general agreement about children and young people's participation, it is difficult to put into practice (Gallagher et al., 2012; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Holland, 2001; Hubberstey, 2001; Woolfson et al., 2009). All studies show that the intent to involve children is present but that social workers still demonstrate striking ambiguities and reservations about the precise role children and young people should play as participants (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b).

One of the reasons why implementation and evaluation of participation is difficult is the lack of agreement of what participation entails. Hart (1992) described participation as 'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives'. He refers to an active form of participation and the *possibility* (his emphasis) that this participation will have an effect on decision-making. Other scientists take a more radical position, arguing that participation is a process by which disadvantaged groups are able to question existing social practices and overthrow those that are responsible for their social, cultural and political exclusion (Hart, Ackerman & Feene, 2004). Either way, participation is not a blueprint which can be moulded to existing social practice but, instead, is a process that is formed in ongoing, reciprocal relations of dialogue and joint decision-making (Thompson, 2007). These relationships and dialogue are influenced by the extent to which people want

to participate, but also by the environment and institutions in which the process takes place.

This review presents the enabling factors and barriers to children's participation that scholars have identified within the statutory child protection and child welfare area from both the perspective of children and social workers. These enabling factors and barriers form the starting point for developing interventions to strengthen participation, to make sure that the interventions match the reality and therefore have the desired results. We first outline the background to this review, before describing the method used to select articles. Next, the results are divided into two categories: children's perspectives, and case managers' and social workers' perspectives. The conclusions integrate the different perspectives and include suggestions for interventions.

4.2 Background

There are a number of challenges to children's participation in child protection services which are inherent in the way the social work and case management systems are organized within statutory practice. These represent the background against which the perspectives of children and the concerned professionals need to be considered.

Challenges facing case managers and social workers

The work of social workers and case managers within the field of child welfare and child protection is very complex. Case managers are legally obliged to act in the best interest of and to safeguard the child. Furthermore, they are expected to listen to the child, and at the same time liaise with families, carers and other concerned organizations (Barnes, 2012; Winter, 2010). This complexity is characterized by a number of different challenges.

Social workers and case managers need to determine what is in the child's best interests in a context where different stakeholders have their own conflicting interests, rights and needs (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Barnes, 2012; Bell, 2002; Pinkney, 2011; Sanders & Mace, 2006). For example, the case manager has to manage the child's right to participate but also acknowledge the custodial role of the parents. In addition, Article 12 of the UNCRC states that the views of children should be taken into account according to age and maturity but gives no guidance on who should assess the maturity of the child and what criteria should be used (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b).

There is also a possible tension between the immediate interests of the child (safe keeping) and their long-term interest (Barnes, 2012; Sanders & Mace, 2006). The professionals have to maintain a balance between the child's right to participate and the child's right to be protected, as well as between the need to gather evidence and the child's entitlement to give information on his or her own terms. This tension might be a symptom of a conflict between the UNCRC principle of participation and the welfare culture in child protection services (Vis et al., 2011). Studies show that children's rights to participate are often set aside in the focus on the child's best interests because social workers tend to view participation as unnecessary for the child's health or welfare (Vis et al., 2011). This partly stems from the belief that adults know what is in the child's best interests.

Another challenge is related to the perspective that children are vulnerable and need to be protected. Professionals worry about exposing children to inappropriate information and responsibilities which, in a child protection context, might be a burden that will deprive them of what is perceived as a proper childhood and could be potentially damaging (Sanders & Mace, 2006). Child protection cases, in particular, often deal with issues that are perceived as adult's problems but involve children (Vis et al., 2012).

Participation of children becomes yet more problematic when the basis for involvement is involuntary, not based on consensus, and where choices may be limited (Gallagher et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2011; Winter, 2009). In these cases, the child protection or welfare services determine the nature of the problem without asking the children what they perceive as the problem, before involving the child or young person in thinking about solutions.

Challenges for the children

Children in care also face complex challenges. For children not in care, decisions are often made by one or two adults with whom they have daily contact, like their parents or daily caregivers, but when children are in care, decisions often are made by a number of adults (parents, social workers, lawyers, judges), some of whom the child has never met and who do not know what is important to the child (Cashmore, 2002; Donnelly, 2010). Many children in care have grown up without the security of attachment which places them at a disadvantage in making informed choices and in ensuring their views are listened to. At the same time, their adult carers may be preoccupied, emotionally unavailable or might even struggle to speak for themselves. These children depend on the professionals around them to make their voices heard and to have influence (Bell, 2002). Children in the custody of protection services face an even greater challenge in voicing their opinions because they risk losing control of

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the situation if they confide in adults because they do not know how adults will act on the information (Sanders & Mace, 2006).

Organizational challenges

Professionals work with vulnerable children who often live in unpredictable, uncertain worlds. At the same time, governments, fuelled by the media, are perceived to hold a view that all risks to children should be foreseen and manageable. This has resulted in high levels of organizational, professional and personal anxiety, unrealistic expectations, media vilification and political concerns about the quality of child protection practice (Beckett et al., 2007; Horwath, 2010; Winter, 2009). With a focus on risk management and protection, the opportunity for participation diminishes and becomes less of a priority.

4.3 Method

This review summarizes multiple studies on child participation within child welfare and child protection. Search for relevant studies was carried out by means of electronic search in the following scientific and social scientific bibliographic databases: PubMed, PsychINFO, Elsevier Science and Web of Science. Google Scholar and Wiley Online were used to identify internet-based literature as well as journal papers not identified in searches of other databases. The search was conducted between November 2011 and June 2012 and was limited to studies in English. Where a systematic review was intended, the methodology of a systematic review, using specific keywords for the search, identified articles covering a too wide range of topics. Key words that were used for the initial search were 'participation', 'children', 'child protection', 'decision-making' and 'social work'. A list of the keywords from the relevant articles was gathered with the intention of running another database search. However, a list of more than 90 keywords emerged from these articles, illustrating a lack of uniformity in the words used to describe this specific field. For this reason, we decided to augment the search with literature included in article references lists.

All articles that addressed children's and/or social workers perspectives in combination with statutory child protection and welfare were included. Articles that concentrated on the children's perspectives of (mental) health services were excluded because the purpose of this review is to identify barriers and facilitators for child protection services.

Defining the statutory role of social workers in different countries is complicated. Approaches to welfare policies differ between countries and sometimes even within countries (Healy, Darlington & Yellowlees, 2012; Katz & Hetherington, 2006). In

general terms, however, it is possible to make a distinction between countries that have a child protection approach, such as Australia and the UK and countries with a family service system approach, such as Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands (Healy, et al., 2012; Katz & Hetherington, 2006). Although we are aware of these differences and the consequence that there are different expectations of the role of the social worker or case manager, we chose not to make a distinction between these approaches and to include studies from different countries. However, since the focus of this study is the statutory role of the social worker, papers solely addressing cases in the context of local care institutions like school and day-care centres, which would in a family system approach not be known by a case manager, were excluded from the review. When differences between approaches are found in our data analysis, we will mention it explicitly.

The findings from the papers were divided between those concerned with the perspective of children and those concerned with the perspective of social workers. Analysis focused on interpretations of participation, reasons for participation, facilitators and barriers. These themes were used as guidance for further grouping within this article.

For the remaining part of this paper, when talking about social workers, we refer to both social workers and case managers within a statutory role.

4.4 Results

For an overview of studies used in this review, see Table 4.1.

The majority of studies are from the UK. Overall, studies on the child protection approach dominate the research field. Only two studies on the social workers' perspectives stem from a family system service approach (Vis et al., 2012; Vis & Thomas, 2009). However, despite the differences in how the child protection system is organized, the social workers' perspectives seem to be the same.

Table 4.1: Overview of articles included in the analysis

Authors	Year	Country	Participants	Focus	Method used	Comments
Buchanan	1995	UK	45	children	discussion meetings	young people between 12 - 17 living apart from their parents.
Holland	2001	UK	16	social workers	interviews	12 cases of children aged 0 - 12, both statutory and voluntary sectors. The social workers conduct in-depth assessments of families.
Munro	2001	UK	15	children	unstructured interviews	children between age 10 and 17 and having been in care for at least 2 years.
Bell	2002	UK	27	children	semi-structured interviews	children aged 8- 16 who had been subject of a child protection investigation.
Cashmore	2002	UK, Australia, North America and New Zealand	22	children	review of studies	22 studies are included that reported on children's views related to participation. The papers included are published between 1993 - 2001.
Sanders & Mace	2006	UK	19	social workers	analysis of reports and interviews	both social workers and chairs of child protection conferences were included.
Beckett et al	2007	UK	22	social workers	focus group discussions	social workers from four English social work teams working with children and families.
Leeson	2007	UK	4	children	semi-structured interviews	in depth interviews with 4 young people in out of home care.
McLeod	2007	UK	11	children	semi-structured interviews	young people aged 9 - 17 years and looked-after for at least 6 months.
Archard & Skivenes	2009	UK and Norway	53	social workers	semi-structured interviews	Norwegian and English child protection workers
Healy & Darlington	2009	Australia	28	social workers	interviews	practitioners in all 5 domains of protection services.

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Authors	Year	Country	Participants	Focus	Method used	Comments
Vis & Thomas	2009	Norway	16	social workers	questionnaire	case managers in the child protection services.
Winter	2009	UK	39	social workers	in-depth interviews	39 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with young children, their social workers and their parents.
Woolfson et al	2009	UK	11	children	semi-structured interviews	children between 11 and 17 who have been the subject of a Child Protection Service CPS investigation.
Horwarth	2010	UK	62	social workers	focus group discussions	front line staff in England who use the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families.
McLeod	2010	UK	11	children	semi-structured interviews	young people aged 9 - 17 years and looked-after for at least 6 months.
Vis et al	2012	Norway	86	social workers	survey	53 case managers within the child protection services and 33 social work students.
Winter	2010	UK	14	children	in-depth interviews	children aged 4-7 years old who had been in care. The interviews were structured around a series of themes and involved 'talking and doing'.
Barnes	2012	UK	20	children and social workers	semi-structured interviews	children aged 12 - 20.
Bessell	2011	Australia	28	children	group discussions, interviews	28 young people with experience of out of home care, who had left the system.
Jobe & Gorin	2012	UK	24	children	qualitative interviews	young people aged 11 - 17 who have been referred to Children's Social Care Services.

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4.4.1. The perspective of children and young people

Studies focusing on the perspectives of the children highlighted children's experiences of participation and the impact it had on them. Furthermore, they reported case conferences as the place where most decisions are made and the relationship with the caseworker as a significant aspect for participation. These subjects are discussed below.

Experiencing participation

The majority of children and young people had the feeling they had limited opportunities to participate in the decision-making process involving their lives or that they had no opportunities at all (Bell, 2002; Bessell, 2011; Cashmore, 2002; Leeson, 2007; Munro, 2001). They reported that they were not well informed about what was happening, why they were in care, what they could expect, and the changes that were happening in their lives (Bell, 2002; Bessell, 2011; Buchanan, 1995; Cashmore, 2002; Leeson, 2007). Some studies found that children generally have the feeling that they are being listened to and given the opportunity to report their views (Bell, 2002; Buchanan, 1995; Cashmore, 2002). However, this did not mean they participated in decision-making or that their views had a central position within the decision-making process. When consulted, children and young people did not feel that their views were necessarily valued or acted upon. Although some were consulted, they found that they had insufficient or inconsistent opportunity to express their views on matters affecting them while in care (Bell, 2002; Bessell, 2011). Children further reported that they were allowed to influence trivial decisions but that the professionals did not let them participate in the decisions they considered as important affecting, for example, where they lived, contact with parents and siblings, and choice of school (Bessell, 2011; Cashmore, 2002; Munro, 2001; Leeson, 2007). Contact with parents and relatives was a major source of conflict between children and young people and their social workers. For example, Munro (2001) reported that most children were dissatisfied with the amount of contact they were allowed to have with parents and relatives and, for some, it was not clear why there could only be contact by telephone. Finally, children wanted to be able to choose their social worker but, in practice, only a few were offered a choice of social worker or what help they could access (Bell, 2002; Leeson, 2007).

The impact of participation

Children and young people said that when social workers valued their views, took their concerns seriously and provided realistic options, they felt good about themselves and valued (Bessell, 2011; Leeson, 2007). Children reacted positively when

they felt that the social worker or case manager listened to their views, even when their choices did not work out in reality. It was more important that they were listened to than that they actually got what they wanted (Cashmore, 2002). Conversely, children felt powerless when plans were not implemented and when their concerns were not addressed (Barnes, 2012; Munro, 2001). The absence of participation created a sense of being ignored or overlooked, leading to a decrease in self-esteem and self-worth (Leeson, 2007). They felt frustrated when their wishes were overruled with no explanation given, when their concerns were not addressed (Leeson, 2007; Munro, 2001) and helpless and desperate as a consequence of not being involved in the decision-making process (Bessell, 2011; Leeson, 2007). When children had the feeling that matters they considered important were ignored or rejected as irrelevant, some spoke of exercising choice in more subtle ways, such as rebelling, withdrawing or using a range of other strategies to avoid engagement (Bell, 2002; Bessell, 2011; Leeson, 2007). Winter (2010) reported that for children aged 4-7 years, lack of consultation led to feelings of guilt, sadness, anger and worry. Moreover, young people felt that if they had the opportunity to have a say, there would be a greater chance of a successful placement, a supportive relationship with their social worker, and more positive experiences at school (Bessell, 2011).

Case conferences

Formal decisions about the lives of children and young people were commonly made at case conferences, review meetings and family group conferences (Cashmore, 2002). Although a number of children and young people did attend such meetings, they were often only present rather than actually participating (Leeson, 2007). When children referred to review meetings during interviews, they generally felt that they had been given the opportunity to express their feelings and that their views had been heard, whether they attended or not (Bell, 2002). Despite this, feelings about attending meetings and conferences were mixed (Bell, 2002; Cashmore, 2002). Most children and young people wanted to know what was said about them and needed reassurance that their views were being represented (Bell, 2002). At the same time, they report feeling intimidated by the large number of people present. In addition, they were concerned that many unknown adults attended the conference, that they did not have access to the same information as the adults, and that they felt poorly prepared and inadequately supported (Bell, 2002; Buchanan, 1995; Cashmore, 2002). Since a lot of the decision-making occurs during case conferences, it is important for children to participate in these meetings. However, even when children were able to be present at case conferences, their full participation was limited by the barriers outlined above.

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The role of the social workers

In most studies, the children and young people stress the importance of having a positive relationship with the social worker (Barnes, 2012; Jobe & Gorin, 2012; Leeson, 2007; McLeod, 2007; McLeod, 2010; Winter, 2010). Overall, social workers were seen as powerful (Barnes, 2012; Munro, 2001; McLeod, 2010). When the relationship was positive, the social worker was seen as a strong ally and was even identified as a significant person in the child's life (Bell, 2002; Munro, 2001; McLeod, 2010). In general, professional qualities of social workers that children and young people considered valuable were availability, reliability and sharing information (Bell, 2002; Jobe & Gorin, 2012; Munro, 2001). Personal qualities that the children and young people saw as important were being concerned, developing trust, listening, being kind, the use of humour and being non-judgmental (Bell, 2002; Bessell, 2011; Leeson, 2007). In the study of Barnes (2012), the young people talked about 'being respected, valued and listened to' as important for creating a positive relationship. They appreciated professionals spending time with them and 'being there' for them, as well as remembering their birthdays (Barnes, 2012; McLeod, 2007; McLeod, 2010).

Most children and young people were, however, not positive about their relationship with social workers. Not keeping appointments, often being late, poor communication and being hard to reach contributed to the feeling that the social worker did not care (Barnes, 2012; Bessell, 2011; Leeson, 2007; Munro, 2001). Frequent change of social worker also had a negative impact, leading to children feeling bereft, forgotten and confused, and resulting in the absence of a meaningful relationship between the young person and the social worker (Bell, 2002; Leeson, 2007; Munro, 2001). Furthermore, in the study of Leeson (2007) respondents felt alienated from their social workers because contact with the case manager was often only at official review meetings and during crises. The young people felt that these were not good times to get their message across and they were doubtful whether their social worker would hear their message (Leeson, 2007).

Children's suggestions for improvement

Most studies used the findings concerning the current situation to formulate suggestions for improvement or to ask children what they would want. Woolfson et al. (2009) directly asked children what could be done to make the system better in the future. The children and young people said that they wanted more involvement in the decision-making process. As a specific suggestion they said that outcomes, agreed upon by all parties, should be carried out or, when this does not occur, some explanation should be given to the child concerned. Furthermore, children and young people should have more opportunity to attend or to be represented at child

protection case conferences, and they should be provided with full information throughout the process (Woolfson et al., 2009).

4.4.2. *The perspective of the social workers*

A main finding from the ten articles exploring the social workers' and case managers' perspectives is that there seems to be a lack of agreement among social workers on how to understand participation, and what weight it should be given. Explanations of the reasons for participation and barriers to participation differed considerably. These issues are addressed in more detail in the next section.

Interpretation of participation

Social workers generally acknowledge the importance of children's participation (Healy & Darlington, 2009; Horwath, 2010; Sanders & Mace, 2006; Vis & Thomas, 2009; Vis et al., 2012). However, when asked what participation means, it becomes clear that interpretations vary greatly. While some case managers describe participation as giving the child the opportunity to express its views, others consider that it is only a matter of giving children information about what is decided or what is going to happen (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b). Some social workers describe participation as consulting the child but this does not mean children have an influence on the decision-making (Vis & Thomas, 2009). Participation is sometimes even described as nothing more than seeing the child. In Horwath's study (2010), professionals realized that if they are to view the child as the service user, it is important not only to 'see' the child, but to also 'hear' from them, obtaining information about their lived experiences, their wishes and feelings (Horwath, 2010).

Besides differences in professionals' interpretation of participation, there are also differences in the weight given to the child's views in the decision-making process when they are taken into account. For instance, Holland (2001) found that even when the view of the child was given some prominence in the assessment, there was a wide variation in the weight given to the children's views by social workers. There is not much evidence that the child's perspective makes much difference to what happens. Vis & Thomas (2009) found that when case managers did talk to children, children's participation affected the outcome of the decision-making process only in less than half of the cases. Furthermore, Archard & Skivenes (2009b) found that when the child has a different perspective than that of the protection worker, the child's opinion will only be recorded.

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Reasons for participation

Social workers also give different explanations of why participation is important. Differences were found between studies and between respondents within studies (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Sanders & Mace, 2006; Vis et al., 2012). First, many respondents consider participation from the perspective of the rights of the child. They acknowledged the importance of participation because it is the child's life and the child has the right to say what it thinks. However, not all social workers see participation as a fundamental right (Vis & Thomas, 2009). Second, children's participation is seen as a way of gathering information (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Vis & Thomas, 2009). For example, in the study of Healy & Darlington (2009), respondents highlighted the value of respecting children's voices for adding more depth to the assessment than would be possible through a focus on 'parents' perspectives' alone. Vis & Thomas (2009) mentioned that a positive effect of children's participation was that the case manager got to know the child's wishes and perspective. Here, the focus seems to be on gathering information to help the case managers and social workers to make a decision. Nothing is said about the impact this has on the decision that is being made. Third, participation was also seen as an instrument for gaining compliance. Case managers mentioned they discovered new facts and gained better understanding of the child's development and abilities, which in turn affected cooperation with parents and other services (Vis & Thomas, 2009). For statutory workers, the primary focus of participatory practice centred on negotiating with parents and children about preferred options for dealing with the problem identified by the caseworker (Healy & Darlington, 2009). Archard & Skivenes (2009b) found that most social workers saw children's participation as useful, primarily because it makes compliance of the child with the decision more likely or less difficult. These findings suggest that, on the one hand, participation helps the social worker to know the child's needs and to make a better recommendation. On the other hand, it serves to help to deliver an outcome that is already decided upon by the social worker (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b).

Barriers to participation

Studies also report that social workers indicate reasons for not involving children (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Holland, 2001; Vis & Thomas, 2009; Vis et al., 2012) and other barriers to facilitating participation. Barriers that are mentioned stem from case content, child factors and organizational aspects.

a) Case content

One of the most often mentioned objections for children's participation in the decision-making process stems from the content of the case. For instance, case managers were less likely to involve children and let them participate if the case was classified as one of abuse or neglect (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Vis & Thomas, 2009) or domestic violence (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b). The appropriateness to involve children seems to be dependent on the seriousness of the case and the consequent concern to protect the child. Vis et al. (2012) found that case managers are afraid of burdening children with participation. This was particularly associated with talking about difficult experiences which might require a therapeutic approach.

b) Sociocultural image of children

The underlying image that social workers have of children can also act as a barrier to participation. Some professionals consider that children cannot take the responsibility that comes with participation and others believe that adults are able to make decisions that are in the child's best interest (Atwool, 2006; Holland, 2001; Pinkney, 2011). When a child is seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, the child's opportunities to participate decrease (Sander & Mace, 2006; Vis et al., 2012).

Social workers often emphasize the need to protect children and highlighted their immaturity (Barnes, 2012). Most professionals express strong reservations about the appropriateness and safety of involving very young children, particularly those under 5 years, in child protection decision-making. Even those who see a role for direct participation, urge close monitoring of the effects of such participation on young children (Healy & Darlington, 2009). However, Vis & Thomas (2009) found that, although older children were more likely to be included in the decision-making process, this did not mean they were significantly more likely to end up as participants than younger children. Some case managers and social workers think that because of understanding, disability and/or emotional state, children and young people may not be in a position to express their views. They may not want to participate, find it intrusive or may not be ready (Sanders & Mace, 2006).

Case managers and social workers point out that there are differences between children that influence the facilitation of participation. When children are labelled as sensible, their views are taken more seriously and given more weight compared to when children's views do not appear rational or sensible to adults (Holland, 2001). The children's views are also questioned when the social workers has the feeling that

the children are ignorant of alternative ways of living (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b) or even have an untrustworthy character (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Holland, 2001).

c) The relationship between child and social worker

Like children, social workers name the relationship as an important aspect to facilitate participation (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Barnes, 2012; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Vis et al., 2012). Having a good relationship may make it easier for children to say what they really mean and knowing the child might help the case manager to evaluate whether the child's statements reflect their true feelings (Vis et al., 2012). Another reason why getting to know the child is important is that it would be wrong to place reliance on a single interview (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b).

Social workers find it difficult to create a good relationship with the child. For example, they do not always feel competent or comfortable with carrying out individual consultations with children (Vis et al. 2012). Another challenge for social workers is to create an environment in which the child feels free to speak and to ensure that this is central to the assessment (Horwath, 2010). In practice, due to lack of a good relationship, it often is difficult for case managers and social workers to know whether the child is telling the truth. Sometimes the child's perspectives are labelled as untrustworthy (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Holland, 2001). Numerous studies reported that social workers question the influence of parents or other adults on the views of the child. Many social workers doubt the authenticity of the children's views in so far as they are loyal to their parents or might be influenced by adults (Archard & Skivenes, 2009b; Holland, 2001).

d) Procedural barriers

Overall, case managers and social workers in different countries mention the same organizational barriers to children's participation, often relating to a poor relationship with the child and the focus on risk management. For example, high caseloads, the burden of paper work and the lack of adequate staffing were often mentioned as the underlying problem for the poor service of the social workers (Barnes, 2012). The combination of these barriers leads to a procedure driven, child unfriendly environment. Social workers talked about a lack of 'quality time' to spend with the young people and said other demands of their work had squeezed out relationships (Barnes, 2012; Becket et al., 2007; Winter, 2009), leading to a situation in which the child's view is seen as subordinate to procedure.

4.5 Conclusions

This review includes articles concerned with the perspectives of children as well as articles describing the perspectives of social workers on children's participation. In the conclusion, we will compare these perspectives. Furthermore, we will point out other possible barriers that stem from the information given by the social workers.

Both children and social workers strongly agree that children's participation in the decision-making process is important. Both case managers and children state that, although there is a growing awareness of children's participation, children's participation is not happening often enough. In addition, even when children's perspectives are taken into consideration, there is little evidence that that it actually makes a difference. Children and social workers both agree that the relationship between the young person and the case manager is the most important factor for successful participation. For children, a good relationship is important to create a situation in which they feel free to say what they want and to feel that they are taken seriously. Social workers also mention the relationship as important for making a judgment on what value the children's opinions should be given and to help to determine whether the child really says what he or she feels. Where the relationship is seen as the important facilitator for participation, both children and social workers mention it as the main barrier. The frequent change of social workers, the social workers time constraints and the focus on protection seem to hinder the development of a relationship. For social workers, organizational barriers, such as a focus on risk management and bureaucratic constraints, add to the barriers for creating the time and opportunity for children to participate within the decision-making process.

Although children and social workers/case managers agree that children's participation is important, there are also some differences in perspectives. First, children and social workers have a different view of what participation entails. The children that participated in these studies see participation as the possibility to have a say in the decisions that are important to them, not the ones chosen by the social workers. Furthermore, they want to be listened to and to feel that they are taken seriously. With social workers, participation was mostly mentioned in combination with gathering and giving information and finding solutions for problems determined by the case manager. They mention participation as looking for options for dealing with the problem. However, Vis et al. (2012) point out that the decision-making process starts with the definition of a problem and ends at a specific point in time when a decision has been reached on a proposal to solve the problem. Not defining the problem together can be partly explained by the involuntary character of the

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social work relationship, where often the child does not agree what the problem is. However, it also stems from the belief that adults know best what is right for the child. Second, where children always want the opportunity to participate, social workers point out multiple situations in which they think participation is not appropriate. Apparently social workers still see children as vulnerable and in need of protection. This view leads to the situation in which social workers decide that a child cannot take the burden of participating in the decision-making process in certain situations.

In summary, seeing children as vulnerable and not always capable to oversee the situations will lead social workers to keep making decisions on their behalf. Supported by procedures focused on protection, the children's legal right of participation is diminished and becomes secondary. This, in combination with the procedural barriers and the barriers in creating a relationship, creates a system in which the child is consulted and informed, but the child's views do not make an actual difference. As we explained in the introduction, decisions based solely on informing and consulting are suggested to lead to less suitable outcomes, with less compliance and motivation of the child, which may have negative child outcomes, such as low self-esteem and feelings of helplessness, frustration and desperation.

As far as we are aware, there has not yet been a study asking children what they feel about the level of protection that they receive and whether they think they are overprotected. However, children clearly want more involvement in the decision-making process. They want to be listened to and taken seriously. Their lived experiences, wishes and feelings should affect the outcome of the decisions, and otherwise they should be explained why a different outcome was decided upon. Although the relationship between the social worker and the child seems to be an important barrier/facilitator for creating an environment where the child feels listened to and taken seriously, it is the social worker that makes the decisions when and how to stimulate and facilitate participation. Interventions aiming to improve children's participation within the child protection and welfare services should therefore not so much focus on the personal relationship with the child, but on the image of children held by professionals and the ambiguities around the legal rights of children's participation. The interpretation and meaning of the legal rights should be clearer to the child protection and welfare services: the child should be seen as the service user and the child image should be less focused on protection, and more on that of a child as a knowledgeable social actor. In other words, the children should get a central position in the decision-making process, right from the start. As long as social workers start the participation process after they have taken the first decisions,

children will not be able to participate in the way they want or in a way which recognizes their human rights.