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Family members' perspectives of child protection services, a metasynthesis of the literature

S. Bekaert^{a,*}, E. Paavilainen^b, H. Schecke^c, A. Baldacchino^d, E. Jouet^e, L. Zabłocka – Żytka^f, B. Bachi^g, F. Bartoli^g, G. Carrà^g, R.M. Cioni^g, C. Crocamo^g, J.V. Appleton^a

^a Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Jack Straw's Lane, Oxford OX3 0FL, England, United Kingdom

^b Tampere University, Faculty of Social Sciences/Health Sciences Unit, Etelä-Pohjanmaa Hospital District, Finland

^c Department of Addictive Behaviour and Addiction Medicine, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany

^d School of Medicine, North Haugh, St Andrews, Scotland, United Kingdom

^e Laboratoire de recherche en Santé Mentale, et Sciences Humaines et Sociales, Groupement Hospitalier Universitaire Paris psychiatrie & neurosciences (GHU- PARIS), 258 Rue Marcadet, Bât N, 2ème étage, 75018 Paris, France

^f Institute of Psychology, The Maria Grzegorzewska University, Szczęśliwicka 40, 02-353 Warszawa, Poland

^g Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Milano-Bicocca, Via Cadore, 48, 20900 Monza, Italy

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ABSTRACT

This metasynthesis brings together what is known about family members' perspectives of their relationship with social care practitioners as a starting point for developing a pan-European training resource for practitioners. Four databases were searched for qualitative literature with search terms relating to family members and social care practitioners. After the application of inclusion and exclusion criteria, 35 studies were critically appraised and were included in the metasynthesis. Three broad themes were identified through a thematic analysis of the studies' findings: family members' perspectives of the system; perceptions of how they were viewed by their worker; and view of their worker. The following aspects are discussed: whether partnership between family and worker is possible within a legal framework; the detrimental effects of cultural bias; and practical foundations for building trust. Recommendations are made for practical support, reflection on cultural practice and broader service provision.

1. Introduction

Child social care or welfare practitioners regularly make crucial decisions that have a significant impact on children and their families. Practitioners and policy makers should have an understanding of how parents and children experience and negotiate mandatory intervention to best support in engaging with child protection plans. Acknowledgement of the importance of parental involvement in provision for their children is set out in the European Convention on Human Rights (Rainey, Wicks, & Ovey, 2014). Furthermore, including children as participants in service design and delivery has been codified internationally in the UNICEF (1989) article 12. Thus, the starting point for any service or training provision in safeguarding should be the family

member's experience.

In this regard, we carried out a systematic literature review aiming to explore family members' perspectives on relationships with social care or welfare practitioners. This is part of a series of data gathering approaches to inform the development of a pan-European, multi-disciplinary training programme in child protection work with families (the ERICA European project). The review examines parent and child perspectives together as representative of the family unit. It explores the interplay between family members themselves, as well as with their workers, within a child protection legislative framework. Bringing the literature together across all family members' perspectives highlights the unique relationship for each with the worker, and child protection system, and the multi-dimensional relationships therein.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: sbekaert@brookes.ac.uk (S. Bekaert), eija.paavilainen@tuni.fi (E. Paavilainen), henrike.schecke@uni-due.de (H. Schecke), amb30@st-andrews.ac.uk (A. Baldacchino), Emmanuelle.JOUET@ghu-paris.fr (E. Jouet), lzablocka@aps.edu.pl (L. Zabłocka – Żytka), b.bachi@campus.unimib.it (B. Bachi), francesco.bartoli@unimib.it (F. Bartoli), giuseppe.carra@unimib.it (G. Carrà), r.cioni1@campus.unimib.it (R.M. Cioni), cristina.crocamo@unimib.it (C. Crocamo), jvappleton@brookes.ac.uk (J.V. Appleton).

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1.1. Background

Family engagement (including mothers, fathers, grandparents, young people and children; both victims and perpetrators) in services is key to promoting effectiveness in social care provision. Over recent years, internationally, governments have increased accountability requirements. Some have stressed the need to refocus social care practice on developing relationships and give workers the freedom to exercise their skills and professional judgement (Featherstone, Robb, Ruxton, & Ward, 2017). However, a risk-averse child protection system with accompanying bureaucracy tends to prevail (Gupta & Blumhardt, 2016; Parton, 2014). With increasing numbers of child protection investigations and care proceedings, and tightly managed social care budgets, there is an inevitable focus on ‘child rescue’ and less space for developing partnerships with families.

As legislative frameworks in safeguarding practice expand, the worker navigates two intersecting areas: forensic child protection procedure, and therapeutic practice. They must simultaneously keep children safe and empower families to do this independently (Cudjoe & Abdullah, 2019; Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020; Spratt & Callan, 2004). Nevertheless, working in partnership with parents is a long-established principle in child protection practice. It is also vital that family members’ experience informs practice. Searches attest to no previous synthesis across all family members’ experiences (Morris, 2012). This study complements the metasynthesis undertaken by Wilson, Hean, Abebe, and Heaslip (2020) which focuses on older children, mostly in out of home care, independently negotiating the care system. This review brings the findings of studies exploring the perspectives of varied family members together. It gives a picture of the landscape as a family in relation to the child protection system and their allocated worker.

2. Method

A metasynthesis has been undertaken with the research question: what are the perspectives of family members’ experiences with child protection services? Metasynthesis was chosen to draw together findings from qualitative research to build a narrative across many studies, generating theory in relation to the research question (Atkins et al., 2008). Bringing studies together overcomes the limitations of small-scale projects, and has the potential to offer a fresh interpretation (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007).

The metasynthesis was registered to Prospero (CRD42020173763), an international database of prospectively registered systematic reviews in health and social care. The guidelines provided by PRISMA (<http://www.prisma-statement.org/>) for conducting and presenting a systematic review were followed.

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The databases CINAHL, Medline, Psycharticles and Sociological Abstracts Online were searched for qualitative research studies relating to family experiences of general child protection services (CPS) and workers (excluding specific intervention programmes). There were no language exclusions. No publication dates were applied as we wanted to map the issue across time. Literature focusing on family experiences of child protection services emerged towards the end of the 20th century. This is in line with legislative frameworks such as the *Children Act (1989 and 2004)* in England and consequent developments with social work practice. Only peer reviewed, scholarly articles were included. The focus was also on an acute safeguarding situation: where a specific incident or escalation of a situation prompted statutory investigation, assessment and action. Thus, we excluded family situations where there is ongoing welfare or social work involvement such as with a child with disability, or preventative social care involvement with a family.

2.2. Search strategy

The search was undertaken with terms and synonyms relating to family members and child protection services. Please see [table 1](#) for search terms used. Several exploratory searches were undertaken to refine the search terms.

Search terms were truncated where several permutations of the word may have been used ie child* would find child/children/children’s etc. Specific double word terms were put in inverted commas to seek these terms as a unit ie “child protection”. This initial search elicited 4879 results. Whilst terms such as engagement, experience, views and perspectives were commonly used in titles relevant to the research question, these were not used as specific search terms as it narrowed the search too early in the literature selection process. This did mean that a large number of articles needed to be reviewed at the outset. However, this led to 10 research studies being included that did not use these terms and were relevant. These 10 articles explored important aspects such as intimate partner violence (IPV) and social care (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008), boundary ambiguity when social care is involved in a family’s life (McWey, Bolen, Lehan, & Bojczyk, 2008) and gendered approaches to working with fathers (Philip, Clifton, & Brandon, 2019; Storhaug & Øien, 2012). Also included were three studies relating to children and young people, whose voices are less present in research (Curry, 2019; McLeod, 2010; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Seventy-six articles remained after this review stage. A second selection level was applied where abstracts were scrutinised in detail with the same inclusion and exclusion criteria leaving 45 articles.

These 45 articles were critically appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool for qualitative studies (CASP Appraisal Checklists Available at: <https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/> accessed May 2020) by researchers in the Italian and English teams. Seven exclusions were made after mutual consideration of relevant study focus, including work with a non-mandatory worker, a focus on the contact process, the ongoing relationship with the worker after statutory involvement, or parent initiated involvement with services. Three exclusions were made where the methodological approach to data gathering and/or analysis was not clear. Thus, 35 articles remained. See [Fig. 1](#) for a PRISMA flowchart of the literature selection process (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009), and [Table 2](#) for a summary of the included studies (see [Table 2](#)).

2.3. Data analysis

The key findings of each study were extracted and placed on coding sheets. These findings were organised into a list of possible interpretive statements for each study. Findings were compared and refined across coding sheets and reconfigured into a larger ‘map’ of themes across the body of literature. These themes were then organised into a narrative. For example, in [Hughes, Chau, and Poff \(2011\)](#) study, the quote ‘*somebody phoned me and stayed on the phone with me all night, and I think that was the beginning of my freedom*’ was coded as ‘extra mile’ and became part of a wider theme of valued support. This then formed part of a narrative arc that explored the following three themes: the family

Table 1
Search terms.

Boolean operator ‘or’	‘and’	Boolean operator ‘or’
Child*		“child protection”
Teen*		“social care”
Adolescen*		“social work*”
Young		“care system”
Youth		Welfare
Mother		
Father		
Famil*		
Parent*		

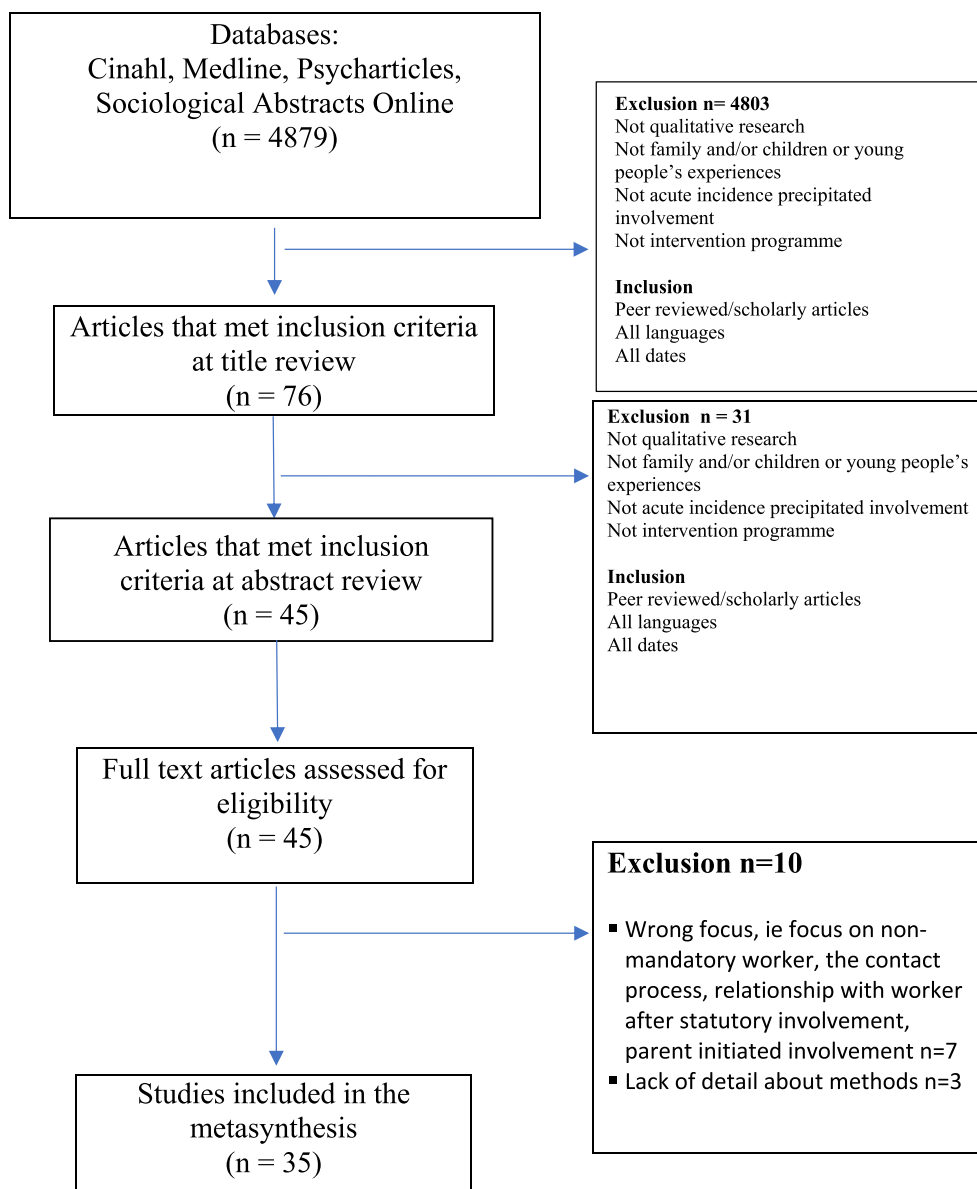


Fig. 1. Overview of systematic search strategy.

member's view of the system, how the family members felt viewed by the system and the outplaying of that through support. Themes and subthemes were reviewed, discussed and refined in discussion with all European teams in the ERICA project (Table 3).

Most studies (n = 20) focused on family members' views of their worker. Six explored family members' relationship with their worker and their view of the wider legislative child protection system. Four studies considered how family members felt they were viewed by their worker along with their view of the worker. Three explored specific constructs of family members by workers. Two studies considered all three aspects. There is overlap between the themes, and each informs the other. The majority of the participants focused on the 'day to day' relationship between themselves and their worker. A few articulated how the system dictates and influences the relationship.

3. Results

3.1. Study characteristics

Thirty-five separate qualitative studies are represented, with the

majority being interview based. Results showed a publication date range from 1999 to 2020, with the most of the studies published in the second decade (n27). This suggests a growing interest in the family member perspective in their contact with social care. Whilst the studies were global, most were undertaken in Europe (n20). Others were from North America (n9), Australia and New Zealand (n4), Canada (n1) and Africa (n1). Included studies provided data on 439 'parent' figures, mostly mothers and fathers/father-figures and grandparents. Ten studies focused on mothers and fathers only, three further studies also included grandparents, while one study focused on grandparents alone. In addition, two studies looked at solely mothers', and two solely fathers' perspectives. Six studies explored the perspectives of parents and their children. Within this, there was greater representation of mothers (approx. n280) compared to fathers (approx. n120). Four hundred and eight children and young people were represented. Ten studies explored the views of adolescents (age range across the studies 9–25 years, approx. n250) and only one study was specifically with younger children (n39) aged 4–7 years. Overall, this gives a good range of perspectives across the family unit, however, younger children's views are under-represented. In the findings and discussion section, the term 'family

Table 2
Overview of included studies.

Author(s)	Year	Country	Study Purpose	Methodology	Method	Sample	Findings	Limitations/ strengths
Arbeiter and Toros	2017a	Estonia	Parental engagement in child protection assessment: A qualitative analysis of worker and parent perspectives.	Part of large qualitative study; methodological approach not stated	Interviews	(11 workers), 10 mothers, 1 grandmother	Valued: genuine interest, kindness, openness and honesty of worker. If felt blamed, became defensive. Bureaucratic and managerial practice leaves little time for relationships. Problem/deficit based practice.	Findings exclusive to study context Single data gathering method Only study in the area in Estonia; difficult to make comparisons
Arbeiter and Toros	2017b	Estonia	Engagement in the context of child protection assessment practices from the perspectives of child protection workers, parents and children.	Rights based approach	Interviews	(11 workers), 11 parents, 11 children	Parents valued trust, dialogue and support. Children wished to be heard, understood, and their opinions to be taken into account.	Findings exclusive to study context Does not include male caregivers
Booth and Booth	2005	UK	The experience and perspectives of parents with learning difficulties (LD) in the child protection system.	Not stated	Guided conversation	18 mothers, 4 fathers	Parents with LD not involved in assessment. Decisions already made. Difficulty in understanding the process. Accepted outcome fatalistically.	Findings exclusive to north of England Phenomenon of self-justification in qualitative interviews
Buckley et al	2011	Ireland	Service user views and expectations of the child protection system.	Not stated	Interviews	13 young people (13-23yrs), 15 fathers, 39 mothers	Shame and stigma being involved in the Child Protection (CP) system. Lack of control. Compliance to avoid losing children. Practical support valued. Basic courtesy valued.	Under recruitment due to sensitive subject Possible over recruitment of those with unsatisfactory experience
Coakley	2013	USA	Fathers' perspectives on fatherhood and barriers to their child welfare involvement.	Part of wider cross sectional study	Interviews	12 fathers	Valued Social Work (SW) involvement motivated by compassion and respect and inhibited by disrespect, judgmental attitudes, unprofessional manner. Gendered practice noted – interactions directed at mother.	Findings may be limited due to use of convenience sample and small sample size
Cudjoe and Abdullah	2019	Ghana	The experiences of parents and workers with parental participation in child protection practice in Ghana.	Phenomenology	Interviews	8 workers, 12 mothers, 7 fathers	Importance of 'first impressions'; authoritative approach/'expert' power was a hindrance to participation.	Only study in the area in Ghana – therefore difficult to make comparisons Does not include the voice of children
Curry	2019	USA	The emotional and relational effects of turnover on youth in the child welfare system.	Part of multi-method, multi-perspective qualitative study	Life history interviews; participant observation	15 young women, (6 workers, 4 admin)	Turnover of workers experienced as loss; expressed desire for open communication about this process.	Single perspective of interviews Retrospective view Women self-selected to the study Small sample Not generalisable
Dale	2004	UK	Parents' perceptions of child protection services.	Unstructured narrative	Interviews	16 mothers, 5 fathers, 1 stepmother, 3 stepfathers, 2 teen daughters, 23 children	Compliance with plans due to threat of losing children. CP conferences stressful, no action after. Listening and contact valued.	Small sample size Family self selection to interview Specific to one county Self report data
Dumbrill	2006	Canada	Parental experience of child protection	Grounded Theory	Interviews	7 mothers 11 fathers	Workers' support. Workers can have narrow preconceived	Findings should be transferred to broader

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Author(s)	Year	Country	Study Purpose	Methodology	Method	Sample	Findings	Limitations/ strengths
							ideas regarding family problems. Pre-established intervention plans. Valued belief and advocacy.	populations with caution
D'Cruz and Gillingham	2014	Australia	Australian parents' and grandparents' perspectives on what needs to change in CP Services.	Participatory research	Interviews	6 mothers, 2 grandmothers, 1 grandfather	Carers not given information about the situation. Need to construct 'whole picture' in family context. Courtesy valued.	Diversity of group; no firm recommendations possible 'Haphazard sampling'; participants self-selected for interview small sample size
Estefan et al	2012	USA	Experiences of parents involved in the child welfare system.	Not stated	Interviews	21 mothers, fathers, father figures, grandparents	Practical support valued. Sometimes unsure why assigned certain tasks; comply to 'get off list'.	Sample drawn from specific parenting programme Participants self-selected for interview
Featherstone et al	2017	UK	Perspectives of young men on relationships with social care workers in the UK.	Not stated	Interviews and focus groups	50 young men 16–25	Young men sometimes found a male worker difficult to trust due to problematic relationship with own father. Different ethnicities challenge assumptions, acceptance is key. Services as third, safe, space.	Geographically specific; socio-economic specificity
Gaskell	2010	UK	Young care leaver's perspectives on the importance of care.	Social justice; partnership	Interviews	7 women, 3 men	Careleavers wanted inclusion in decision-making with a consistent adult. Frequent care moves were destabilizing. They felt ignored and sometimes disbelieved. They wanted explanations in an accessible form, and to be able to contact their worker with ease.	Small sample size Single method study
Gentles-Gibbs and Zema	2020	USA	Kinship grandparents' perspectives on family empowerment in public child welfare.	Grounded theory	Interviews	8 grandparent caregivers	Tangible resources and relational support valued. Support in navigating the system.	Small sample size Different family circumstances Varied state service experience
Ghaffar et al	2012	UK	Exploring the experiences of parents and carers whose children have been subject to child protection plans	Not stated	Interviews	39 mothers 8 fathers 64 boys 67 girls	Wanted information about the child protection process. Lack of time to read and reflect on information. Assessment process stressful. Case conferences daunting. Felt judged. Clarity, honesty and listening skills valued.	Ethnic minorities underrepresented Those with recent criminal background or currently involved in court proceedings not included
Haight et al	2017	USA	Reflections on moral injury by parents involved with child protection services.	Part of mixed method study	Interviews	9 mothers, 1 father	Noted little ongoing information and support; workers did not address underlying issues associated with current IPV and trauma of past abuse.	Single interview on moral injury only Small sample size
Hughes et al	2011	Canada	What mothers who have experienced IPV say about involvement in the child protection system.	Subset of larger qualitative study	Interviews	64 mothers	History used to justify current worker involvement. Mother as protector.	Participants self-selected to interview Ethnic minorities underrepresented
Jobe and Gorin	2013	UK	Young people's views on seeking	Part of multimethod study	Interviews	14 boys and 10 girls, 11–17 yrs	Problems can escalate in teenage years;	Only young people currently receiving a

(continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Author(s)	Year	Country	Study Purpose	Methodology	Method	Sample	Findings	Limitations/ strengths
			and receiving help from Children's Social Care Services in England.				developmentally related. Young people want to be believed, listened to and informed within a consistent and trusting relationship. A lack of confidentiality with family members.	service were included Small sample size
Johnson and Sullivan	2008	USA	How child protection workers support or further victimize battered mothers	Feminist theory	Interviews	20 mothers	Mothers receive little information about their children if removed from their care. Sanctions and requirements to regain custody. Emotional trauma of losing children. Perpetrators not held to account.	Small sample
Lindahl and Bruhn	2017	Sweden	Foster children's experiences and expectations concerning the child-welfare officer role. Prerequisites and obstacles for close and trustful relationships.	Subsample of national evaluation	Interviews	53 children 11–19	Favoured close and trusting relationship with SW; with limits to how close they can be. Preferred same officer over time.	Not recorded; notes
McLeod	2010	UK	'A friend and an equal': Do young people in care seek the impossible from their social workers?	Qualitative aspect of mixed methods study: survey/ interviews	Interviews	7 male and 4 female 9–18 yrs	Young people felt they were not listened to. Practical assistance, sociability and emotional support valued. Takes time to develop relationship; preferred workers from own background. Grieve 'lost' workers, abandonment.	One local authority Survey and interviews Small sample
McWey, et al	2008	USA	Boundary ambiguity for parents involved in the foster care system.	Mixed methods: interview then measures/ demographic questionnaire	Interviews	20 mothers, 2 fathers	'Boundary ambiguity'; tension between authority figure in family and social care involvement.	A-priori focus area by researchers majority of participants were mothers
O'Connor et al	2014	Welsh	Perspectives on children's experiences in families with parental substance misuse and child protection interventions	Mixed methods: interview then measures	Interviews	13 young people aged 13–21	Valued a 'friendly' and accessible worker, developing a relationship over time, with timely intervention.	Small sample Includes data from young people who contributed during parental interview therefore limited/ demonstrated complex interdependent relationships
Philip et al	2019	UK	To explore impact of time and gendered-thinking on working relationships between fathers and social workers in CP practice in England.	Longitudinal study	Interviews	35 fathers 6 mothers	Fathers felt marginalized and were isolated from family. Noted system urgency then inaction. Need for regular communication. Cultural prioritization of mother and child.	Almost all fathers interviewed were white British; no young fathers (youngest 21 years)
Scott et al	2018	NZ	Perspectives from CP social workers and parents living with mental distress.	Subset from Child Custody Research Project	Interviews	(11 workers) 4 fathers, 9 mothers	'Recovery blindness' of services; specifically in relation to mental health and addiction. Focus on risk over potential change. Childcentric practice.	Single city; not generalisable
Smithson and Gibson	2017	UK		Not stated	Interviews	8 fathers, 11 mothers	Valued characteristics: spending time,	Recall bias Cases randomly <i>(continued on next page)</i>

Table 2 (continued)

Author(s)	Year	Country	Study Purpose	Methodology	Method	Sample	Findings	Limitations/ strengths
			Experience of parents involved in the CP system				empathy, good communication, being contactable, listening. Emotional strain on parents and children. Power imbalance, 'moving goalposts', delayed decision-making. Hands-on support by worker valued.	selected Parent, not child, focus Closed cases inaccessible/those involved in legal process not included due to possible current traumatic situation/cases selected similar
Spratt and Callan	2004	Ireland	Parents' views on social work interventions in child welfare cases.	Third part of a 3 stage project; mixed methods	Interviews	11 mothers, 7 fathers	Parents sometimes unsure why worker is involved. Valued openness, honesty, and a worker that goes beyond procedural requirements in their work.	Part of multi-method study Small sample Notes taken not recordings
Storhaug and Øien	2012	Norway	Fathers' encounters with the child welfare service.	Interpretive phenomenological analysis	Interviews	7 fathers	Fathers seen as irrelevant; dismissed as caregiver, 'cultural lag'. Fathers viewed as threat and risk.	Small sample Part of multi-method study
Strolin-Golzman et al	2010	USA	Listening to the voices of children in foster care: youths speak out about child welfare workforce turnover and selection.	Mixed methods: survey and interview	Focus groups	25 young people (av age 17.6yrs)	Change of caseworker experienced mostly as negative; lack of emotional and physical stability. Sometimes represents as 'second chance'.	Convenience sample; older, independently living
Tregeagle and Mason	2008	Australia	Service user experience of participation in child welfare case management.	A priori framework: Shier's framework for analysing power in participatory strategies	Interviews	14 children and young people, 2 fathers, 16 mothers	SW seen as reliable people. Parents stated if can't negotiate, avoid SW. Young people included less – often at school.	Mixed sample recruitment strategies may have excluded service users who had had negative experiences of case management systems excluded inclusion of children < 10 years
Tregeagle	2010	Australia	Australian service users' experiences of child welfare case-managed practice.	Draws on discourse analysis	Interviews	14 children and young people, 2 fathers, 16 mothers	Negotiation is possible. Practical assistance valued: ie food, housing. Listening skills valued. Transition in workers – frustrating.	Limited agency involvement Service users who are no longer in touch with welfare agencies because of dissatisfaction with services were not included Children under 8 years were not included There was likely gatekeeper control at several levels
Van Bijleveld et al	2014	Holland	Young people's and child protection workers' perspectives on children's participation within the Dutch CP and welfare services.	Participation as theoretical background	Interviews	(16 case managers)16 young people	Young people want to be heard, informed, taken seriously.	Small sample due to the difficulty in recruiting young people Gatekeepers such as case managers restricting access to young people
Whitfield and Harwood	1999	UK	Parents' experience of CP investigations.	Mixed methods: closed questionnaire/ interviews	Interviews	3 mothers, 1 father	First interaction with service critical. Lack of transparency regarding initial referral. Case conference: workers listen but don't take notice, no action post conference.	Small mixed sample
Winter	2010	Ireland	The perspectives of young children in		Case studies, interviews	39 children 4-7yrs	Whilst children may be relieved they are no	The researcher had a preexisting (continued on next page)

Table 2 (continued)

Author(s)	Year	Country	Study Purpose	Methodology	Method	Sample	Findings	Limitations/ strengths
			care about their circumstances and implications for SW practice.	Informed by interpretivist/child rights framework			longer at home there is still a need for connectedness, and to make sense of their circumstances. Otherwise the 'emotional void' adds to their trauma.	relationship with the children Participants used a variety of methods
Woolfson et al	2010	Scotland	Young people's views of the CP system in Scotland.	Not stated	Interviews	11 children and young people, 12-17yrs	Poor understanding of system; fear of implications. Felt like 'passive bystanders'. Psychologically challenging.	Gatekeeping by social-worker, parent or carer to young people's recruitment Small sample size No ethnic groups represented

Table 3

Summary of themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Subthemes
Family members' views of their worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical resources • Relational support
Family members' perceptions of how they were viewed by workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mothers' role as protector • The troubling presence and absence of fathers • Specific family circumstances • Deficit view of children and young people's abilities/assumptions of adolescent autonomy
Family members' views of the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paternalism over partnership • The disruptive power of social care intervention • 'Rushed and slow' involvement

members' will be used when referring to both parents, young people and children; otherwise the specific term for the family member will be used: mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, young person (9–25 years), child (4–7 years).

3.2. Themes

3.2.1. Family members' view of their worker

Most family members across the majority of studies focused on the relationship they had with their worker. Their worker was both implementer and mediator of the child protection process. A positive relationship was reflected in accounts of practical resource provision, and respectful engagement through regular communication, listening, and believing family members' accounts of events, or commitment to change. A valued worker was one that overtly demonstrated genuine commitment to the family.

Most studies had examples where family members had appreciated the provision of specific resources. These included respite care for kinship carers (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020), transport to case conferences and courses (Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2011; Estefan, Coulter, VandeWeerd, Armstrong, & Gorski, 2012), access to health provision (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020), food vouchers (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008; McLeod, 2010; Tregeagle, 2010), support with housing applications (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008), access to support groups (Coakley, 2013), and specific support for children (Dale, 2004; Estefan et al., 2012). Emergency, one off help was appreciated, for example buying a packet of diapers for a mother having a particularly difficult month financially (Dumbrill, 2006). Provision of a safe space was a notable

benefit for young men. This could provide an essential breathing space and relieve the loneliness of an empty flat and enable avoidance of the streets (Featherstone et al., 2017). Practitioners that went 'the extra mile', beyond procedural requirements, were appreciated: for example, one mother commented how her caseworker advocated on her behalf with the police when her in-laws were harassing her (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008). Parents and young people felt such support was related to the worker's genuine interest and kindness (Arbeiter and Toros, 2017b; McLeod, 2010; Spratt & Callan, 2004).

Communication was a strong theme across studies and from all family members. Difficulty in being able to contact workers was a source of frustration for many family members (D'Cruz & Gillingham, 2014; Dale, 2004). Young people particularly felt that the worker should be in regular contact with them rather than expecting them to contact the worker (Gaskell, 2010). Punctuality was valued, with young people noting that they would not 'get away' with such 'inconsistent and unreliable' behaviour themselves (Buckley et al., 2011, p106). Young people valued a consistent relationship with a professional they felt they could trust (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017). Listening skills were also valued by parents (Ghaffar, Manby, & Race, 2012). In Gaskell's (2010) study, many young people said that they had struggled to express their personal difficulties to workers as they felt ignored or disbelieved. These young people saw the ideal worker as a friend and equal (O'Connor et al., 2014). This view challenges 'professional' social work boundaries.

Family members in Ghaffar et al.'s (2012) study said the first interaction between professionals and families was critical. They appreciated clarity and honesty about reasons for agency involvement, and knowing what is expected and the consequences of not meeting those expectations (Ghaffar et al., 2012). Grandparents specifically commented on lack of support in navigating the system (Gentles-Gibbs & Zema, 2020). They stated that written information about the child protection process would have been helpful, as well as somebody to explain and talk them through this information (Ghaffar et al., 2012). Some studies noted how the initial child protection concern came as a complete surprise to the families. Their first contact with services occurred when unfamiliar professionals contacted them, or arrived at their home unexpectedly (Whitfield & Harwood, 1999; Woolfson, Heffernan, Paul, & Brown, 2010). Mothers with learning difficulties in Booth and Booth's (2005) study said they could not recall ever having had an assessment. Many of the young people interviewed in a study by Jobe and Gorin (2013) were unclear about the safeguarding processes and some did not understand what having a child protection plan meant.

3.2.2. Family members' perceptions of how they were viewed by their worker

Many of the studies engaged with family members' observations of negative constructs in worker's engagement with them. Parents noted gendered expectations from, and gendered engagement with, workers. Parents with specific needs such as learning disability, a history of substance use or domestic violence felt prejudged as destined to fail. Children and young people noted assumptions of vulnerability and yet autonomy in patterns of engagement with their worker.

Across the studies, family members spoke of how preconceived understandings of specific family circumstances, with presumed trajectories and roles, would influence the worker's approach. Parents reported that workers tended to have little hope for them if they had mental illness or addictions. They spoke about 'recovery blindness', and how a focus on risk overshadowed opportunities to see potential growth and change (Scott, Pope, Quick, Aitken, & Parkinson, 2018, p99). The parents in Scott et al.'s (2018) study noted that little weight was given to a long history of stability and good parenting prior to a diagnosis. These parents highlighted the potential for parenting to be a recovery opportunity, to address addiction or manage mental health issues. One father commented: *'I keep myself good because I know that my kids need me'* (Scott et al., 2018, p99). Mothers in Hughes et al.'s (2011) study remarked that historical issues were used to justify current involvement in the system. Some of these mothers reported that their involvement began because of domestic violence from the father, but then workers continued to be involved for reasons that focused on them (Hughes et al., 2011).

Family members perceived workers as holding narrow pre-conceived ideas about their problems. Parents felt they were given little opportunity to talk with workers regarding the interpretation given to events, or the plans formulated. This was felt most acutely by parents with a specific need such as learning difficulty, mental health diagnosis or drug and alcohol use (Booth & Booth, 2005; Scott et al., 2018). In Booth and Booth (2005) study, parents with learning disability noted that their opinions had little impact even when practitioners did liaise with them. They felt their cases were fitted to pre-established intervention plans.

Mothers spoke of scrutiny and sanctions even when 'innocent'. Viewing the mother as protector of the child/ren was the dominant trope in practice; *'We went to CPS (Child Protection Service) and they were helpful, but they made it very clear about the obligations. It was up to me to protect my son'* (Haight, Sugrue, Calhoun, & Black, 2017, p1087). Mothers who were subject to domestic violence felt they were hastily, and unfairly, blamed for their children's ordeals (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008). The mothers in Johnson and Sullivan's (2008) study who lost custody of their child/ren remarked how numerous conditions were placed on them to regain custody, yet the perpetrators received no such sanctions. They highlighted that perpetrators were rarely confronted regarding their violence which condoned the abusive behaviour and left them feeling alone and without support. The mothers in Smithson and Gibson's (2017) study noted that child protection plans were often continued as fathers failed to engage, exposing mothers to continued scrutiny.

Whilst father's voices were less numerous across the studies, where they were present, experience of exclusion in the child protection process was apparent. In Coakley's (2013), fathers spoke of how workers seemed troubled by their absence, and also their presence, in the family. Absence, through being 'removed' if the perpetrator of abuse, and presence, through trying to maintain a positive role within the family. The fathers voiced feeling feared and marginalised; *'Everybody I talk to basically looks at my wife and holds conversations with my wife...social services is very female-oriented...they want to help the female'* (Coakley, 2013, p11). Sometimes, it was the mother's presentation of the father that created the understanding of him as a threat, and the worker tended to accept the mother's views (Storhaug & Øien, 2012). Fathers spoke of struggling to gain recognition as an involved caregiver (Philip et al., 2019). Fathers also remarked that some mother's care behaviour in

relation to the child protection process appears to be tolerated and supported in ways that are not available to them (Philip et al., 2019).

Worker's assumptions were also apparent in children and young people's narratives. In Jobe and Gorin's (2013) study, young people noted that they were viewed by the worker as less vulnerable as they grew older. However, their difficulties had actually escalated in the teenage years: undisclosed abuse emerged; safeguarding risks arose with growing independence; concerns about maltreatment came to light, some witnessing domestic violence and parental illness; some became homeless, developed mental health problems, alcohol/drug misuse, behavioural problems, risk taking behaviour, or violence and conflict with parents.

Overall, children and young people voiced that they did not feel their concerns were listened to, or that they had adequately participated in decision-making regarding child protection plans. They felt they were viewed as embedded within the family, rather than being seen as competent individuals able to exercise agency (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Tregeagle & Mason, 2008; Winter, 2010; Van Bijleveld et al., 2014). One young person remarked that the social worker would inform her parents of what she had said, the abuse would escalate as a result, and therefore she withdrew from the relationship with her worker (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). Children stressed that their views, whatever their age, should be heard, but that they felt more listened to as they got older (McLeod, 2010).

3.2.3. Family members' view of the system

Available evidence shows an overriding negativity from all family members in having social care involvement in their lives. Parents felt stigmatised and that they had to defend themselves and their families from a deficit view of their situation. The worker had ultimate control over goals and timeframes which meant that the parents were consistently fearful for their child/ren being taken into care. Similarly, children feared being taken into care. Young people were particularly frustrated by the high turnover of workers which disrupted relationships and compounded a sense of abandonment by adults in their lives.

Even when there was positive rapport with their worker, the overriding sentiment was one of legalistic power over family life which ultimately had to be 'obeyed'. In Buckley et al.'s (2011, p104) study, one mother stated *'You are involved with the process but you have no control over the outcome'*. For some, the power was felt as absolute, tyrannical and frightening as it destabilised who held the authority in the family (McWey et al., 2008). Some parents in the studies noted how workers prescribed action with which they had to comply to avoid consequences, the most worrying being losing their children (Buckley et al., 2011; Dumbrill, 2006).

There was shame and stigma in being associated with child protection services. A mother in Buckley et al.'s (2011, p104) study described the encounter as: *'An opportunity to talk openly about my dirty washing'*. Parents in Arbeiter and Toros' (2017a) study felt they were blamed, and made responsible for their situation; even when the engaging parent was not the perpetrator. They felt that the system's approach was problem, or deficit-based, rather than seeking to understand the family situation. This was compounded by increasing bureaucratic professional practice and a lack of time to build relationships.

The legislative power of social services could be enabling, through facilitating support in difficult family circumstances. However, family members tended to experience social care intervention as disruptive. Parents in several studies noted how they reluctantly complied with protection plans so workers were no longer involved in their lives (Dale, 2004; Dumbrill, 2006; Estefan et al., 2012; Smithson & Gibson, 2017). Parents in Smithson and Gibson's (2017) study found that new actions were added to their plan, and timelines extended, leading to a loss of faith in the worker and the system.

In Philip et al.'s (2019) study, fathers remarked on the short or sudden periods of action by social workers followed by long periods of delay. A mother in Dale's (2004) study noted two years elapsed before a

recommended assessment was provided. Another mother in Whitfield and Harwood's (1999, p56) study was struck by the worker's absence after the initial assessment; 'What was the point of putting my bairn on that register...I've only seen her (social worker) once apart from core group meetings'. Parental frustration grew when the child remained subject to plans due to delayed decision-making. This did not allow for progress and resolution (Smithson & Gibson, 2017). For young people, the absence of their social worker could compound a sense of abandonment already present from their family situation (Woolfson et al., 2010).

Parents in Smithson and Gibson's (2017) and Ghaffar et al.'s (2012) study stated that they found child protection case conferences stressful. There was a need to absorb an overwhelming amount of information in a short period of time and they felt unprepared for what was going to happen. There was also a perceived need to 'defend' themselves. Some felt decisions were made before meetings started, negating the point of attending. The turnover of workers, resulting in inconsistency and further delays, often led to family members being less engaged with new workers (Smithson & Gibson, 2017). This issue was raised repeatedly by young people who reported rarely being openly communicated with about a change in worker (Curry, 2019; Gaskell, 2010; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). They were either not told at all, or given very little notice. Some remarked that as soon as trust was developed the worker moved on (Gaskell, 2010). The young people experienced changes of social worker as a loss. Some felt sadness, disappointment, and hurt. Others responded by emotionally shutting down, withdrawing, or claiming indifference. Some found it helpful when workers signified the end of the relationship in a special way, such as taking them out to eat, having a goodbye party, or giving a gift or a card (Curry, 2019). They also emphasised the importance of overlap and the outgoing practitioner introducing the new (Curry, 2019). Overall, young people noted the lack of emotional and physical stability due to the constant changing of caseworkers (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010).

4. Discussion

This review sought to examine family members' perspectives of statutory child protection involvement. Themes identified through synthesis of the identified studies were family members' relationship with their worker, how family members perceived they were viewed by their worker, and family members' view of the child protection system. The majority of studies focused on the worker/family member relationship, with some venturing into reflections on gendered and deficit constructs that they felt impeded this relationship. In a few studies, family members reflected on the child protection system itself, sometimes with recognition of the workers' difficult task of balancing family support and child protection jurisdiction. Although there is overlap between the themes, each informs the other.

Through metasynthesis, the findings have highlighted the power imbalance between family members and child protection services. Firstly, through the legal framework of child protection involvement. Secondly, the detrimental effect of preconceived expectations in relation to specific family situations (ie domestic violence, drugs and alcohol), gender (ie differing expectations for mothers and fathers), and age (ie expectations of independence and receding needs for adolescents at a time when new challenges in relation to development may become apparent).

Family members speak frequently about being confused, disempowered, and pre-judged by the worker and the child protection system. This lack of power within the relationship can lead to anger and frustration as well as resistance to, and disengagement from, the service that could be a support. To achieve collaboration, or even partnership with family members, the worker is required to work to redress this imbalance of power and tailor their practice accordingly. Family members do, however, give many examples of how the worker can lay practical foundations for the establishment of trust between family members and workers. When this occurs, the resultant rapport and trust

can mitigate occasions where the worker is required to implement legislative power. Tew (2006) explores the concept of power in social work. There is the power to do or be or act – where power is conceived of as a 'thing' that an individual or group holds; and power over others, and here this rests with the worker who is government agent of control 'enforcing' the law within a legislative child protection framework. There is also power together, where traditional power dynamics are deconstructed, and respectful, engaged collaborative partnerships are developed. Power together reflects a rights-based approach to social work, and is productive rather than potentially oppressive.

McPherson (2020) has noted a shift from a human-needs to a human rights approach in social work. This is a move from a 'rescue', approach, where the social worker acts primarily as government agent enforcing the legislation of the Children Act (1989 and 2004), to a collaborative approach, working together towards safeguarding goals. A human rights approach looks beyond a solely family focus to wider socio-cultural context in supporting the child. This in turn allies the worker with the family members in pursuing justice on behalf of families. Yet this can be a fragile relationship as both family members and workers are cognisant that legal power rests with the worker. The worker can retreat behind legislation and assert control, and may be required to do so in certain circumstances. The literature examined in this review suggests that family members are constantly mindful that collaboration may be illusory and that a 'failure' to adhere to the 'joint' plan can have punitive outcomes. Overall family members viewed child protection services as paternalistic rather than a partnership for the benefit of the child/ren. Family members viewed their worker, or the system, as having power over them. Involvement with services was experienced as enforced engagement with a legalistic 'power', where the worker was ultimately in control. Most complied with plans as the best route out of involvement with services. When the 'goalposts' of plans were moved, social work activity was all-encompassing then absent, or workers changed frequently, this caused frustration, resignation and withdrawal from the process. Family members also highlighted how culturally embedded views of specific parental situations lead to workers making deficit assumptions despite evidence to the contrary. This is a less overt power that is embedded as social relation and can open up, or close off, opportunities for individuals or social groups depending on the accepted understanding of certain phenomena (Tew, 2002 p165). There is evidence for certain poor patterns in outcomes for specific situations such as drug and alcohol use or domestic violence. Research suggests, negatively yet realistically, that the past tends to be the best predictor of the future (Reder et al., 2005). 'Start again syndrome', where practitioners attempt to affirm parents desire to do things differently for their children or in the future, has been viewed as naivety in serious case reviews (Bekaert & Richardson, 2022). Workers tread a difficult path regarding accountability and responsibility alongside an optimistic approach that encourages change.

Nevertheless when family member's strengths are recognised by professionals, this is empowering, improves morale, increases trust and moves towards resolution and reparation (Estefan et al., 2012; Ghaffar et al., 2012). Where there is a partnership between the worker and family members, parents and children feel able to contribute to plans, and there is greater positive outcome. This represents power together. However, a position of partnership is difficult. Decisions made in the interests of the child may not align with parents' wishes, despite representing an improvement for the child (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Confronted with concerns for their children, parents may feel attacked and respond in defence and fear. There is stigma in being involved with child protection services, and an underlying fear of having child/ren taken into care (Featherstone et al., 2017). Power over is the status quo and power together proactively achieved. The relationship between worker and family member is key, voiced by the majority of participants across the studies. Despite the legislative framework and the balance of power resting with the worker, a level of trust can be established. The groundwork for this trust comes from practical support and therapeutic

relationships. Service users appreciated practical help, clear communication and regular contact with their worker. Children and young people in particular, reflecting principles of attachment theory, needed continuity and a secure base, and, as this was absent in their family, they looked for this in their worker (McLeod, 2010).

To facilitate positive outcomes for all family members, the worker has to work flexibly between partnership working with all family members to a child focused stance in line with Child Protection law. This creates a fragile partnership. However, if the worker endeavours to build a foundation of power together, family members do have a better understanding of the actions of the worker if and when they need to take legislative action.

4.1. Strengths and limitations

This review benefited from a systematic approach generating a narrative across available evidence according to the specific research question. However, we should acknowledge some limitations. The main limitation of this review is that a metasynthesis is based on the findings from qualitative reports rather than on the data collected for the original studies. Results are therefore potentially limited by the fact that it is an interpretation of other researchers' interpretations. This is mitigated by the number of studies with concurring findings. Although four different sources were scrutinised, some literature, located in other databases, may have been missed. This has been mitigated by conducting several initial exploratory searches to fully investigate the search terms. Keeping database level exclusions to a minimum, ensured the majority of exclusions occurred through careful scrutiny by the research team and therefore erroneous loss to automated exclusion was minimised. Some studies were excluded through critical appraisal due to lack of method detail, therefore whilst rigour has hence been maintained in the review some insights may have been lost as a consequence. The aim of the review was to bring all family members' experiences of their involvement with social care into synergy with each other. It has been successful in this respect; however, representing all family members in one review may dilute synthesis in relation to specific family members. As the majority of studies were conducted in Europe, the findings are Eurocentric and not necessarily representative of international experience. Lastly, whilst the literature was international in reach, there will be country specific legislation and policy in relation to child protection which brings heterogeneity regarding intervention thresholds and therefore family members' experiences.

4.2. Recommendations

Different recommendations may be drawn from across the three themes: those in relation to the practical and relational aspects of the family member/worker relationship which build rapport and trust; those that facilitate critical and reflective social work practice; and those that are recommendations for systemic change that might be considered across all countries represented. The main recommendation is for workers to communicate regularly and openly with families. Honesty and transparency facilitate trust, trust is the foundation for partnership, and this, in turn, facilitates positive outcomes. It is important to explain the social work process, and re-explain as needed (D'Cruz & Gillingham, 2014). Developing written resources to facilitate navigation of the system; and developmentally appropriate resources for children would be useful (Woolfson et al., 2010). Workers should take time to listen; acknowledge family members' feelings and views, and believe their accounts. Furthermore, they should maintain levels of courtesy. For example, returning calls and being punctual. This builds a sense of reliability and trust that is the foundation for partnership working. Practitioners should offer practical support, and mobilise resources to do so, where possible. When there is a change in worker, the worker should offer closure through gesture, and handover specifically with the new worker and service user.

Workers should critically reflect on their use of power and be aware of the impact this power has on interaction (Dumbrill, 2006). Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sessions around specific scenarios such as domestic violence (Johnson & Sullivan, 2008), parents with learning difficulties (Booth & Booth, 2005), drugs and alcohol use (Storhaug & Øien, 2012) should be available to workers. A knowledge of child development is also essential to inform support of children and young people (Woolfson et al., 2010). Workers would benefit from reflecting on stereotypes that marginalise or overburden family members, and resist patterns of practice that perpetuate such stereotypes. Regular supervision to facilitate reflection on the power dynamics between worker and family members would encourage recognition of the inherent difficulties of partnership working in a legislative framework, and emphasise how proactive communication and action from the worker can mitigate this inherent power imbalance. Facilitating such reflective practice to examine professional constructs in relation to the specific needs of certain client groups is a vital process for all workers. There is scope also for a 'special interest' Social Worker role where there are pathways for workers to develop expertise in a particular area. Having separate workers for family members rather than the family as a whole could also be helpful in debate and advocacy for each family member, though this would require significant social work resource and investment.

Issues such as delayed systemic decision-making and the negative impact of staff turnover could be mitigated by introducing statutory timeframes for such decisions, and formal handover sessions for worker change over. This is a familiar concept in social work in England, where, for example, there are clear timescales for assessments and decisions when a safeguarding concern is identified as set out in the document Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2018). A pre-case conference meeting with the family to explain the content and procedure, which in many areas is seen as good practice, mitigates some of the stress this complex multidisciplinary formal meeting incurs for family members.

Services could reduce the detrimental effect of staff turnover through reconsidering organisational practices such as worker unit rotation (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2010). Workers should be encouraged and enabled to maintain links with children in care, even after moving to other jobs (McLeod, 2010). A longitudinal study to explore the impact of maintaining such contact with significant adults would provide useful data for such ongoing relationships in relation to outcomes for care experienced young people. Teams should lobby local and national government regarding realistic budgets and support services to enable family support. A child protection service cannot solely be reliant on a legislative framework and the fragile partnership between workers and families.

4.3. Conclusion

The child protection worker has a 'complex mission' (Thrana & Fauske, 2014). Working within a legislative framework and with constrained resources practice tends towards risk based, reactive and defensive practice. Such crisis intervention requires rapid response and is informed by societal and workplace cultural constructs regarding family roles and responsibilities. Plans arising out of such constructs tend to overburden (mothers) or exclude (fathers and children). However, the underpinning ethos of child protection practice draws on family strengths. Partnership working is valued by family members and workers alike. For such therapeutic work to occur, the worker needs time, a reasonable caseload, and a range of preventive and supportive resources to support families. If their main resource is the legislative framework, by which both the family and the practitioner are judged, the practitioner cannot take the risk of an optimistic approach, and paternalistic practice, to the detriment of partnership working, is inevitable.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

S. Bekaert: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. **E. Paavilainen:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **H. Schecke:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **A. Baldacchino:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **E. Jouet:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **L. Zabłocka – Żytka:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **B. Bachi:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **F. Bartoli:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **G. Carrà:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **R.M. Cioni:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **C. Crocamo:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing. **J.V. Appleton:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - review & editing.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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