

Article

# Too Vulnerable to Participate? A Systematic Literature Review of the Gap between a Right to Participate and Participation, in Welfare Services

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## Abstract

There is a need to reconceptualize children as competent and reflective actors in their own lives, acknowledging their right to be heard and to participate in meaningful ways. This article explores and suggests the means to overcome the gap between the formal right to participate and meaningful participation in welfare services that involve evaluating a child's family environment. For this purpose, we conducted a systematic literature review to synthesize the qualitative literature on how children and young people who have been in contact with child welfare services experience participation in the making of decisions that affect their well-being. The articles collected from eight scientific databases indicate that despite a growing general emphasis on the importance of child participation over the past 25 years, the operationalization of children's right to be heard is challenging in child welfare services. There are challenges at both the organizational level, with the failure to fully acknowledge and operationalize children's right to be heard in a sufficient manner, and at the individual level, with a need to improve opportunities for communication that facilitate trustful relationships between child welfare social workers and children in need. Based on previous studies of participation in a child welfare context at different levels, we conclude that a legally clear framework in combination with the realization of Skivenes and Strandbu's definition of participation would increase the chances that children's interests and right to be heard are respected, protected, and implemented.

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## 1. Introduction

This article's data material is based on the method of systematic literature review, searching for peer reviewed articles in eight scientific databases. We searched for studies that have used qualitative methods in accessing children's experiences of practicing their right to be heard and to participate in child welfare decisions in their own best interests made by social workers.<sup>1</sup> We discuss this body of research in light of participation theory and the child's right to participate according to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The articles for review were collected by conducting a systematic literature search and analysis based on the following research question: What are the experiences of children and young people in contact with child welfare services with respect to being heard and being able to participate in decisions concerning their own well-being? Our theoretical standpoint is inspired by social constructivism, and our argument is that participation can be facilitated using local guidelines inspired by participation theory and legal regulations.

One challenge when conducting research on children's right to be heard is the unclear definition of what obligation(s) this right implies for practitioners in its operationalization. We adopt a definition of participation that is strongly inspired by [Skivenes and Strandbu \(2006\)](#), although we emphasize opportunities to express views in various forms and channels. Skivenes and Strandbu's (2006) definition of participation entails the following step-by-step procedure:

1. Opportunities for children to form an opinion based on adequate information, appropriate to age.
2. Opportunities for children to express their viewpoints in a decision-making situation, either themselves or through a trusted person. The expression of opinion should not be limited to verbal expressions but rather should be open to a multitude of forms through which opinions can be expressed (e.g. body language and/or artistic expression).
3. Children's arguments must be taken seriously and evaluated on the same basis as adult arguments.
4. Children must be informed about decisions and have opportunities to appeal to an external body to minimize the misuse of power.

In the context of decision-making, children are among the social groups whose degree of participation depends to a great extent on adults' willingness to let them participate. This is to some degree understandable because children's capacity to make informed and well-considered decisions is still developing ([Ballet et al. 2011](#)). Consequently, paternalistic decision-making may seem justified to secure the child's best interests from a broader perspective. At the same time, children have an unconditional right to be heard and to participate according to Article 12 of the UNCRC (UNCRC 1989;<sup>2</sup> Committee on Children's

1 When referring to social workers in this article we refer to the context of the studies included in this study; this is further discussed in section 3.1 below.

2 Although this is a systematic literature review and not limited to Norwegian studies, we find it relevant to mention the UNCRC's status in Norway as it could affect our basis of reflection as

Rights, General Comment Art. 12. 2009<sup>3</sup>). The possible tension between children's right to participation and social workers' obligation to make decisions in the child's best interests needs to be overcome to fully implement and operationalize human rights for all children.

Over recent years, there has been an increased emphasis and an increasing amount of research on how children experience participation (van Bijleveld et al. 2015; Kriz and Skivenes 2017). The review by van Bijleveld et al. (2015) of 21 studies of children and social workers' experiences of child participation and Kriz and Skivenes' (2017) comparative study of child welfare workers' perceptions of child participation in England, Norway, and the USA show that social workers' socio-cultural image of children affects children's degree of participation. An image of children as especially vulnerable seems to reduce opportunities for participation (van Bijleveld et al. 2015;<sup>4</sup> Kriz and Skivenes 2017; Sandberg 2015). Vis (2014) found that despite their right to be heard, the likelihood for children to be consulted in a decision affecting them depends on factors related to the individual social worker and the organization responsible for the decision. These findings, based on quantitative methods, call for a more detailed description of children's experience in the decision-making process (Vis 2014), justifying a systematic literature review of qualitative studies on this issue.

## 2. Method

To meet this study's aim of exploring the gap between children's right to participation and their meaningful participation in welfare institutions, we conducted a systematic search for articles describing children's experiences of being heard when in contact with child welfare institutions. This was done to give us guidance on how participation for this group is experienced from an inside perspective. We wanted to have a clear focus on children's own experiences without being modified or limited by the experiences of social workers.

In formulating the question of interest, we used the PICo (Population/Problem–Interest–Context) (Murdoch University 2018) tool for determining search strings and focusing the question of interest based on answers to 'who', 'what', and 'how' questions (Booth et al. 2016). For this review, we searched for qualitative studies due to the complexity of experiences of being heard and experiences of participation. Table 1 shows the process of framing the research question.

### 2.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

1. Qualitative studies were chosen because of participation in child welfare services being characterized by significant complexity arising from the obligation to ensure that the decisions made are in the best interests of the child while also respecting children's right

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researchers. The principle of the child's best interests has substantial weight in Norwegian legislation in line with the Human Rights Act Section 2 and the priority given to the UNCRC over conflicting national legislation according to Section 3.

- 3 State Parties to the UNCRC are not committed to act according to the General Comments given by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Nonetheless, these comments are the most authoritative interpretations of the UNCRC articles (Sandberg 2014: 20).
- 4 The study conducted by van Bijleveld et al. (2015) is relevant for this article as it provides information on barriers and factors facilitating child participation from a child and social worker perspective.

**Table 1.**PICO

P	children: children or youth in contact with child welfare/child protection services
Population	
I	experience and expressed participation in decision-making implemented by child welfare/child protection services
Interest	
Co	contexts in which child welfare/child protection services have an influence on children's life situation, such as out-of-home placements and child welfare institutions
Context	
Study design	qualitative studies

to be heard in making these decisions (Skivenes 2005; Skivenes and Strandbu 2006). Due to this complexity, the field of child welfare is interdisciplinary, as it relates to children's health, the quality of caregiving, and children's rights. In qualitative studies, a deeper understanding of children's experiences of participation can bring to light new knowledge on this subject and inform practice.

2. Studies were narrowed to those considering children and young people's experiences, thereby excluding studies in which children's family members or social workers were participants. This choice was made to maintain a clear focus on children's experiences of being heard and participating in decisions made by social welfare workers. We did not want to limit the studies by examining one specific age group of children or young people because of the formulation of Article 12 of the UNCRC, which states that all children who are capable of forming their own views shall be given an opportunity to be heard (UNCRC, Art. 12). The Convention defines a child as a human being below the age of 18 (UNCRC, Art. 1).
3. The idea of service user participation has received increased attention in the last 25 years. Since 1995, participation has been emphasized by public authorities as a priority for health and social services (Humerfelt 2005; Eide 2013; Skivenes 2005; Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen 2017). In 2015, van Bijleveld et al. published a state-of-the-art review on children's participation within child welfare and child protection services (2015). Due to their work on this issue, we concentrate on studies published from 2011 until June 2019. The searches performed by van Bijleveld et al. were conducted in 2011 and 2012, and we decided that our search would overlap these two years to include articles that may have been accepted but not published at the time.
4. Primary studies presented in peer-reviewed journal articles in English or Scandinavian (Norwegian, Danish, or Swedish) languages were included.

## 2.2 Search strategy

When planning this review, we developed a protocol to protect against bias and prevent deviation from the chosen method (Booth 2012).

The search terms, established in collaboration with a senior librarian, were as follows: children, youth and adolescents AND user involvement in decision making or participation AND child welfare services AND words for experiences, feelings, perceptions, or attitudes. The search was limited to research with a qualitative study design. The search terms

consisted of words from the database-controlled vocabularies (index terms), text words, or synonyms from the title or abstracts.

The searches were conducted in eight databases. For English articles, MEDLINE, Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, Social Work Abstracts and SocINDEX (through EBSCOhost), and SCOPUS were searched. The search terms used in these databases included the following words and terms; `child welfare`, `child protection`, `foster care`, `foster home`, `child and family welfare`, `out of home`, `decision making`, `involvement\*`, `participat\*`, `qualitative AND research\* OR design\* OR stud\* OR method\*`, `interview\* OR phenomen\* OR themes\* OR thematic analys\* OR narrative\*`, `expericenc\* OR attitude\* OR perception\* OR feeling OR opinion\*`, `child\* OR adolescen\* OR young OR youth OR teenage\* OR teen OR teens OR schoolchild\* OR boy OR boys OR girl OR girls OR users OR user OR consum\* AND involvement\* OR participat\*`.

For Scandinavian articles, the Norwegian and Nordic index to periodical articles Norart (Nasjonalbiblioteket 2019) and SveMed+ (Karolinska Institutet 2019) were searched. Search terms used in these databases were; `community participation`, `child welfare`, `foster home care`, `child protective services`, `social care` OR `child protec\*` OR `foster home` OR `foster care`, `child and family services`, `medvirkning OR involvement OR participat\*`, `patient participation`, `medbestemm\* OR medvirkning\* OR brukermedvirkning\* OR participat\* OR involvement AND barnevern\* OR fosterhjem\* OR barneomsorg\* OR `child protection\*`.

Single searches and a combination of the mentioned search terms were used in the searches conducted 28 and 29 May 2019.<sup>5</sup>

Table 2 gives an overview of the review process, using the PRISMA Flow Diagram (The Prisma Group 2009). As the table shows, there was some overlap between studies found through EPSCOhost and SCOPUS, which was expected.

Strömmland and Andersen read all the articles assessed for eligibility and critically evaluated the studies using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (2018). After this step, we agreed on the final nine studies for inclusion.

### 2.3 Method of analysis

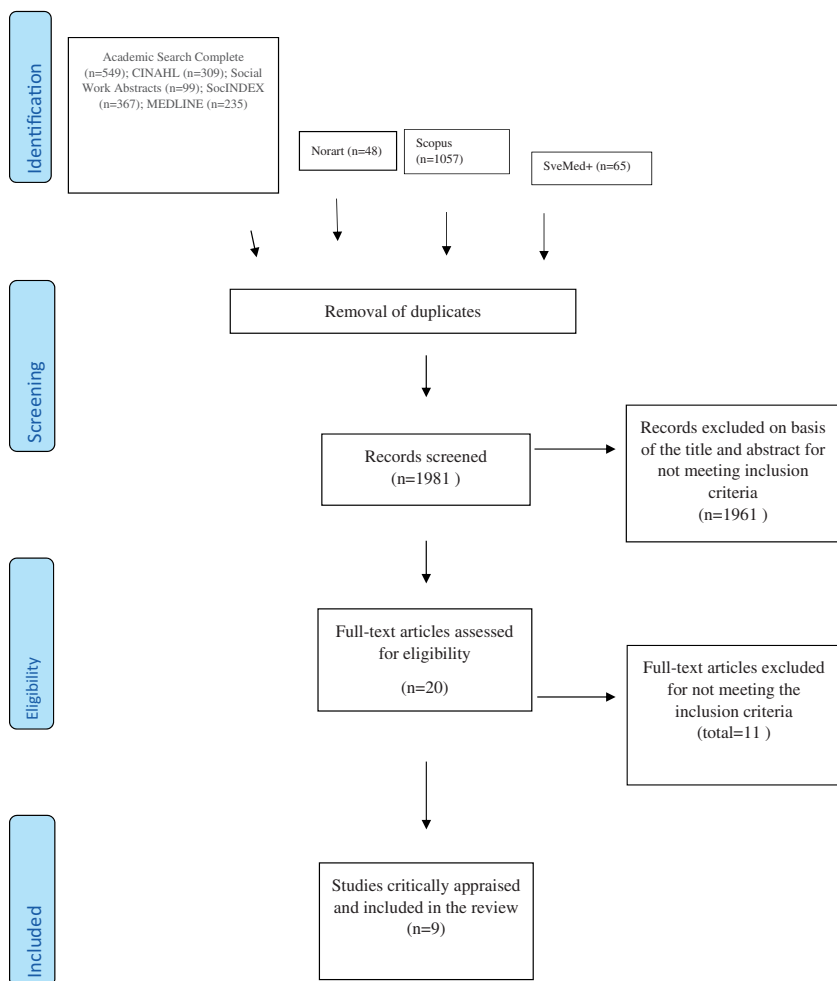
Thematic content analysis, inspired by critical theory, was used when conducting the analysis of the nine included studies (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2009). The themes discussed in the next section were derived from this analysis.

## 3. Results

Table 3 provides information on the studies included in this review, covering the author(s), year of the studies, the country they were conducted in, aims, method(s), context of child welfare, participants, and a short summary of their findings. Please refer to the appendix for an overview of the included studies.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the search strategy and/or information on search conducted May 28 and 29 2019, please contact the first author of this article.

Table 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram (The Prisma Group 2009)



### 3.1 Summary of included studies

As mentioned above, organizational and individual factors are essential when facilitating and operationalizing child participation, which opens a gap between what is provided for in Article 12 of the UNCRC and its operationalization. This could be due to an unclear definition of what children's right to be heard implies and the resulting lack of clarity over the basis for child participation. The included studies all pointed to this lack of clarity. The various definitions of participation adopted in the studies were as follows:

1. **Bessell (2011)** adopted a three-dimensional definition, under which children must be given sufficient and appropriate information, have an opportunity to express their views freely, and be able to affect the decision (p. 497).

**Table 3.** Overview of the included studies

Author (year) Country	Aims	Methods	Context of child welfare	Participants	Findings
1. <a href="#">Bessell (2011)</a> Australia	Explore children and young people's experiences of participation in decision-making while in out-of-home care.	Focus groups, in-depth interviews, brief attitude surveys and sentence completion activities.	Participants who had been in out-of-home care.	Young people who had left the system and had been living independently for the last 12–36 months. N = 28	The participants felt they had little or no opportunity to participate in a meaningful way in decisions made about their lives. This had implications for their sense of dignity and self-worth.
2. <a href="#">Fitzgerald and Graham (2011)</a> Australia	Study children's perspectives on their participation in decision-making processes when in supervised contact with parents.	Semi-structured, in-depth interviews including other activities to help the children reflect on what participation or 'having a say' is.	Being in supervised contact with parent(s).	Children aged 4–13. N = 13	Twelve of thirteen reported that a decision had been made without them being able to participate. Ten of thirteen reported that they thought all children should be able to participate or 'have a say'. The participants reported negative emotional responses when their views were not heard.
3. <a href="#">Cossar et al. (2016)</a> United Kingdom	Study children and youths' views on the child protection process in England.	Qualitative, activity-based interviews.	Children subject to child protection processes and living at home.	Children and youth aged 6–17. N = 26	For the participating children to be able to voice their thoughts and feelings, a trusting relationship was regarded as important. Minimal contact between the children and social workers was reported. Younger children reported less contact on their own than older children, and the atmosphere in the meetings was described as too interrogative.

(continued)

**Table . (continued)**

Author (year) Country	Aims	Methods	Context of child welfare	Participants	Findings
4. <a href="#">Dillon et al. (2016)</a> United Kingdom	Study children's experiences of participation in a child protection setting in England.	Qualitative, individual interviews.	Current or historical experience of contact with Children in Need or the Child Protection Services Plan.	Children and youth aged 12–17 N = 5	The study found that some of the participants reacted with anger and surprise when contacted by child welfare services, negatively affecting trust and communication with social workers. In addition, the children felt a need to communicate face-to-face with the social worker when necessary. All participants had experienced positive changes in their lives as a consequence of being heard.
5. <a href="#">Paulsen (2016)</a> Norway	Study children and youths' experiences of participation when in contact with the Child Welfare Service in Norway (Barnevernet) and the factors influencing participation in this context.	Qualitative focus group and in-depth interviews.	All types of child welfare contexts, including experiences of living in an orphanage.	Children and youth from 16–26. N = 45  Youth aged 18–22	Children and youth experience a limited degree of participation, and participation depends on the relation between the child/youth and the service worker.



**Table . (continued)**

Author (year) Country	Aims	Methods	Context of child welfare	Participants	Findings
6. <a href="#">Križ and Roundtree-Swain (2017)</a> USA	Explore young people's feelings and experiences regarding participation in child welfare services.	Qualitative, in-depth interview methods implemented by a researcher with lived experience with the child protection system.	Participants previously in the care of child services. All had foster home experience.		Participants in this study had mixed experiences with participation, not entirely negative or positive. All reported lack of information as a critical point, noting that this was especially scary and confusing in the situation of being removed from their home.
7. <a href="#">Damiani-Taraba et al. (2018)</a> Canada	Share youths' opinions on how child protection workers could improve children's experiences with listening and participation.	Qualitative, participatory methods.	Youths who had been in contact with child welfare services at some point in their lives (foster homes and group homes).	N = 8 Youth aged 16–23 N = 10	The results extracted from the stories told by the youth in this project revealed seven key themes. The first two were related to a lack of communication, where the youth felt the workers were prejudiced towards them and did not have their best interests at heart. The third theme highlighted the importance of being included in decision-making. The fourth and fifth themes focused on the importance of human connection and networks. The sixth theme focused on support with achieving individual goals and dreams and finding opportunities to contribute positively to others. The last theme focused on the way child welfare services is shaped where youth in care often feel that they have to fit the system, not acknowledging them and their individual needs.

(continued)

**Table . (continued)**

Author (year) Country	Aims	Methods	Context of child welfare	Participants	Findings
8. <a href="#">Fylkesnes et al. (2018)</a> Norway	Study ethnic minority youths' experiences of participation in out-of-home placements.	Qualitative in-depth interviews.	Youth living in out-of-home placements.	Youth aged 16–23 N = 6	A key finding was that youth participation takes place in a complex interplay wherein those capable of communicating an image of themselves as 'a competent child' were more likely to participate in decisions made on their behalf. Opinions different from the majority norms in Norway had a tendency to be marginalized by the social workers.
9. <a href="#">Husby et al. (2018)</a> Norway	Develop knowledge on interactions among professionals, children and parents to improve practice and teaching on child participation.	Qualitative explorative design.	Children and youth who had been child welfare service users and were burdened by social-emotional problems, various forms of neglect and violence.	Children and youth aged 9–17 N = 10	Most of the children were not involved nor given an opportunity to participate in multiple teamwork settings in which services were developed for them. The study also indicates the importance of a close relationship between professionals and children/youth to facilitate participation. In this process, children and youth called for various pedagogical modes of dialogue and interaction.

2. [Fitzgerald and Graham \(2011\)](#) defined participation as being heard or ‘having a say’ (p. 490).
3. [Cossar et al. \(2016\)](#) defined participation as something more than a procedure, as it depends on the quality of the relationship between the child and the professional (p. 110).
4. [Dillon et al. \(2016\)](#) gave no clear definition of participation and pointed to the blurriness of the concept. They concluded that children are fully capable of understanding when participation is appropriate and when it is not (p. 83).
5. [Paulsen \(2016\)](#) pointed to national government documents stating that children must be given opportunities and be encouraged to express their opinion(s) throughout the child welfare service decision-making process (p. 4).
6. [Križ and Roundtree-Swain \(2017\)](#) defined participation as giving children opportunities to express their opinion(s) and wishes about their care, and the ability to influence decisions (p. 32).
7. [Damiani-Taraba et al. \(2018\)](#) reported on a youth-led project in which the participants defined participation as the foundation upon which other rights are built. They emphasized that children and young people should be involved in what they experience participation to be: an ongoing and iterative process of decision-making on their behalf from investigation to deciding on out-of-home placement (p. 91).
8. [Fylkesnes et al. \(2018\)](#) defined participation by referring to a national document stating that participation is a process that must be carried out over the whole course of the child welfare case (p. 342).
9. [Husby et al. \(2018\)](#) defined the concept of participation as children’s legal right to be involved in decisions affecting them, emphasizing that child participation is a collaboration between children, their families, and the professionals involved (p. 443).

Several researchers, including in some of the studies analysed here, have pointed out that a lack of child participation could also be due to our cultural understanding of the child and individual skills of the professional in enabling a trustful relation ([Strømland et al. 2019](#); [Biggeri et al. 2011](#); [Cossar et al. 2016](#); [Dillon et al. 2016](#); [Fylkesnes et al. 2018](#)).

Considering the emphasis made by the Committee (2009) that a child’s right to be heard is intrinsically linked to the child’s right to have their best interests respected, we were surprised that there was little discussion of the child’s best interests in eight of the nine articles under review. These eight articles mentioned the child’s best interest between zero and four times. Only the article by [Damiani-Taraba et al. \(2018\)](#) describing a youth-led project mentioned the child’s best interests extensively (six times) and called for a change in practicing and balancing the child’s right to be heard with the right to have their best interests respected, especially for children under the age of 12 (p. 91).

The studies in this review involved participants from Western countries, namely Australia, Canada, Norway, the USA, and the United Kingdom. Despite these all being Western societies, the context and regulations related to child protection differ between countries and this presents a challenge in performing research on child welfare and child protection ([Gilbert et al. 2011](#)).

The overall findings indicate that listening to children and giving them opportunities to participate are challenging tasks for social workers working in a child protection and child welfare context. Social workers have different conditions and regulations depending on the

context and their place of work. The different contexts of closed institutions, health care provision, and the asylum process clearly have an impact on children's formal and practical possibilities for participation. Nonetheless, they have a common obligation to protect, promote, evaluate, and secure the child's best interests.

Based on their stated aims, the articles share a desire to give voice to children and young people's experiences of being heard in a way that could improve child participation in child welfare decision-making. There is a large age range in the included samples, from 4 to about 26 years. We decided to include studies with participants over the age of 18, for two reasons: (1) we could not tell to what degree age influenced the studies' conclusions or how many of the participants were in the over-18 age bracket, and (2) the Child Welfare Act in Norway includes a right for people under the age of 25 to the maintenance of services established before the age of 18, on their consent ([The Child Welfare Act \[1992\]](#) § 1–3). As described in the included studies, some of the participants older than 18 were still voluntarily in contact with child welfare services. Although the study of [Bessell \(2011\)](#) does not provide the ages of the participants, we chose to include it because most of the participants were reported to have left the child protection system within 12 to 36 months prior to the study, indicating that they were between 19 and 21 years old. Six of the studies had participants with experiences of out-of-home care, and three had participants with experiences of receiving help while living with their parents.

The children and young people sampled in the included studies did not experience thorough and consistent opportunities for participation or even opportunities to be heard when decisions were being made about their well-being. The authors explained this as being due to both organizational-level and individual-level factors.

The organizational-level factors identified in the reviewed studies were difficulties in operationalizing and recognizing the child's right to be heard. [Fylkesnes et al. \(2018\)](#) supported the claim made by [Moosa-Mitha \(2005\)](#) of a need to develop models for child participation to realize children's right to be heard. The challenges to realizing participation at the individual level were explained by pointing to social workers' skills in building trusting relationships with children in need of help. Practices for enabling participation are further discussed in the next section of this article.

#### 4. Discussion: putting the right to be heard into practice

When children and young people come into contact with child welfare services they are in a particularly vulnerable situation, partly because their family environment is under scrutiny and also because of the position they are placed in as a 'source of evidence' ([Cossar et al. 2016](#)). In this position, they are dependent on adults to respect and enable their rights to be heard and to be protected ([Archard and Skivenes 2009](#)). This makes a child welfare and child protection context radically different from other situations in which children's right to be heard has been improved, such as in health or educational contexts.<sup>6</sup> In the context of child welfare services, securing children's rights is especially important to reduce their vulnerability. When families are under scrutiny, paternalistic decision-making is sometimes necessary, and situations can arise in which, to protect the child's best interests, social

6 In Norway, children's right to be heard in these areas has improved, partly due to the implementation of the UNCRC and Section 104 of the Constitution but also as a consequence of the recognition of children as independent legal subjects in law ([SYSE, A. 2017](#)).

workers must make decisions that are contrary to the views of the child or their legal guardians. It is thus particularly important to develop procedures that respect the child's right to participate within the frame of the child's best interests. As we see it, the operationalization principles suggested by [Skivenes and Strandbu \(2006\)](#), which form the step-by-step procedure of participation introduced in the introduction to this article, could make it possible for children to practice meaningful participation even in cases when paternalistic decisions are necessary. The crucial step is the third, in which children's arguments must be taken seriously and evaluated on the same basis as those of others involved in the decision.

Article 12 gives all children capable of forming a view the right to express it in all matters affecting them. The Committee (2009) further states that age should not be seen as a limitation to seeking and listening to children's opinions and preferred choices,<sup>7</sup> noting that even very small children are able to express themselves through play, body language, paintings, and facial expressions. This supports the call from the children participating in the study of [Husby et al. \(2018\)](#). Practical pedagogical support could give even very young children opportunities to communicate their feelings, visions, and thoughts ([Husby et al. 2018](#)). Using this type of support could strengthen young children's opportunities to protection by law, forming a wider basis of knowledge for professionals to evaluate children's best interests ([Strømmland et al. 2019](#)). In the following, we discuss how organizational and individual structures and assumptions can hinder the facilitation of vulnerable children and young people's participation in decision-making on their behalf. To fill the gap between the right to participate and actual participation, we point to Skivenes and Strandbu's (2006) four stages of operationalization.

#### 4.1 Enabling participation at the organizational level

Addressing organizational factors emerges from the reviewed articles as crucial for enabling child participation in child welfare institutions. The most important organizational factors appear to be the limits on the time that professionals have to perform their work, limited legal knowledge regarding participation, and a lack of knowledge of how to operationalize meaningful participation.

A main theme in most of the included studies was children's lack of opportunities to participate in decisions made on their behalf ([Bessell 2011](#); [Cossar et al. 2016](#); [Paulsen 2016](#); [Damiani-Taraba et al. 2018](#); [Husby et al. 2018](#); [Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017](#); [Dillon et al. 2016](#); [Fitzgerald and Graham 2011](#)). The same theme was identified by [van Bijleveld et al. \(2015\)](#) in their review of 21 studies examining child participation in the context of child welfare and child protection. This finding is echoed in a study conducted by [Vis and Fossum \(2015\)](#), who found that organizational culture had an even larger impact on social workers' decisions regarding whether to include children in the decision-making process than individual assumptions and beliefs.

The results reported in the included studies point to such organizational factors as insufficient time being scheduled for social workers to spend with children in need of help, a lack of organizational guidance for structuring meaningful participation, and limited knowledge regarding the rights perspective. These factors contributed to limited contact between social workers and children/young people ([Husby et al. 2018](#); [Cossar et al. 2016](#);

7 On the issue of age, the UNCRC Committee does not comment on ages above 18, as their definition of a child is 'every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier' (UNCRC, Article 1.)

Bessell 2011; Paulsen 2016; Fitzgerald and Graham 2011). As noted by Bessell (2011), Cossar et al. (2016), and Paulsen (2016), this is likely to be a consequence of organizational structures that are not fully developed to adequately operationalize children's right to be heard. When children and youth were listened to, this was due to the individual attitudes of social workers (Bessell 2011) or the child's capacity to project an image of themselves as 'a competent child' (Fylkesnes et al. 2018; Kriz and Roundtree-Swain 2017).

Many of the included studies reported that a paucity of meetings between social workers and children/young people reduced the opportunities for building trusting relationships (Paulsen 2016; Husby et al. 2018; Dillon et al. 2016; Cossar et al. 2016; Damiani-Taraba et al. 2018; Bessell 2011). Fitzgerald and Graham (2011) found that children who reported having been exposed to abuse had a stronger claim on the respect for their views than the other participants. When the researchers asked the children about what having a say felt like, the children immediately responded that they felt happy, whereas experiencing not having a say made them feel 'bad', 'angry', 'sad', 'left out', and 'upset'. This reinforces the importance of operationalizing children's right to have a say and to participate in all areas affecting the child, especially in child welfare organizations.

#### 4.2 Enabling participation at the individual level

Individual factors or characteristics of the social worker, such as being empathic, giving the child recognition, and being skilled in establishing trustful relations, were mentioned by the participants as important for them to feel safe in giving information and wanting to participate in the decision-making process.

All of the studies included in this review reported on children and young people who had had some positive experiences of being heard when in contact with child welfare services. However, the right to be heard had not been operationalized in an adequate and sufficiently thorough manner. Six of the 26 participants in the study of Cossar et al. (2016) reported that they would not confide in their social worker at all. For them to do so, a relationship of trust would need to be established. The individual resources of the social worker, such as empathy and recognition of the child, were reported by the participants as fruitful for establishing a good relation and therefore constitute important factors at the individual level. These individual characteristics of the social workers were experienced by children as encouraging the free expression of feelings and thoughts and a desire to participate in decision-making (Husby et al. 2018; Bessell 2011). Distanced social workers who were committed to strictly following the book did not instil trust (Paulsen 2016), and the children and young people participating in the study of Cossar et al. (2016) reported that they felt interrogated and pressurized if they had the impression that they were only a source of evidence.

Kriz and Skivenes (2017) found that how social workers perceive participation affects the opportunities they provide for children to participate. This is interesting because opportunities to participate are a consequence of being heard. The study conducted by van Bijleveld et al. (2019) found that social workers' facilitation of child participation in decision-making is complex. On the one hand, social workers are aware of children's right to participate; on the other hand, their assumptions and beliefs that children are vulnerable and have limited resources to express themselves and reflect on their difficult life situations can result in paternalistic decision-making that excludes children from the process of

participation. To operationalize child participation, [van Bijleveld et al. \(2019\)](#) thus called for a cultural shift at both the individual and organizational levels.

The findings presented by [Damiani-Taraba et al. \(2018\)](#) from their project in Canada are especially interesting in terms of promoting participation, considering the youth-led procedure they adopted to determine what social workers could do to promote a feeling of being listened to and a desire to participate. The participants' responses were summarized into seven themes: 'listen to us and believe us', 'keep us informed and be honest', 'involve us in the decisions', 'support us', 'keep us connected', 'ignite our passions', and 'don't give up on us'. These same themes also emerge as essential for participants in the other studies included here and underline the importance of communication when deciding what is in the child's best interests.

### 4.3 Overcoming the gap between voice and participation

In overcoming the gap between voice and participation we suggest the procedure for the operationalization of participation put forward by [Skivenes and Strandbu \(2006\)](#). The strength of this procedure is that it acknowledges children as entitled to information and participation during the whole decision-making process. The procedure incorporates the right to be heard but also goes beyond this in facilitating opportunities for actual participation by inviting children into the decision-making discussion and providing them with opportunities to voice disagreement with the result. Important in this procedure are the opportunities for children to appeal a decision that is contrary to their view. This issue was not dealt with in any of the articles included in this review but is surely crucial for meaningful participation and to acknowledge children as competent rights bearers.

A weakness of Skivenes and Strandbu's (2006) procedure is that it gives no guarantee of actual child participation as it is realized in human interactions. Children's right to be heard is the most distinctive element of the Convention on the Rights of the Child ([Freeman 2017](#)), and it gives children the right to be heard in all matters affecting them. However, there is little purpose of being heard if one cannot participate in all stages of the decision-making process. Addressing this gap is essential for operationalizing rights in general and the right to be heard in particular. The studies included in this review identified many reasons for the failure to facilitate child participation, from systematic discrimination on the basis of not fitting the assumption of what 'a competent child' should be like ([Fylkesnes et al. 2018](#); [Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017](#)) to excluding children on the basis that they are too vulnerable to participate ([Husby et al. 2018](#); [Fitzgerald and Graham 2011](#); [Cossar et al. 2016](#); [Damiani-Taraba et al. 2018](#); [Bessell 2011](#)). Considering the importance highlighted by [Fitzgerald and Graham \(2011\)](#) of being heard and having one's views respected and considered, especially for children exposed to abuse, it seems there is a great need to facilitate the paradigm shift pointed to by these authors to promote the dignity and self-worth of children in vulnerable situations ([Bessell 2011](#)).

[Vis et al. \(2011\)](#) explain children's negative experiences of participation in child welfare services as a consequence of the failure to make processes and communication between children and social workers 'child friendly'. It also appears that the children in our included studies were exposed to discrimination with regard to being given the opportunity to decide for themselves whether to participate in research studies on their experiences of contact with child welfare services ([Leeson 2007](#); [Fitzgerald and Graham 2011](#)). Two studies problematized this issue, pointing to the fear of silencing especially vulnerable children to the

point that they are no longer heard (Leeson 2007; Fitzgerald and Graham 2011). This point was also highlighted in the review conducted by van Bijleveld et al. (2015): ‘When a child is seen as vulnerable and in need of protection, the child’s opportunities to participate decreases’ (p. 135).

Our review indicates that very young children are especially vulnerable in terms of being given the right to be heard and to participate in child welfare decisions made on their behalf (Fitzgerald and Graham 2011; Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017; Cossar et al. 2016; Paulsen 2016). Interestingly, most of even the youngest participants in this literature review—the children in the study conducted by Fitzgerald and Graham (2011)—had an understanding that having a say was not equal to getting what they wanted (9 of 13). Furthermore, 10 of the 13 participants in that study believed that all children should have a say, but only 1 of 13 had an experience of being involved in a decision made on their behalf. This suggests to us a need to rethink children’s capacity to participate in decision-making even at an early age.

Upon comparing the studies’ results, it was found that continuing to see children as especially vulnerable reduces their opportunities to participate (Bessell 2011; Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017). This point was also made by Leeson (2007), in the review conducted by van Bijleveld et al. (2015), and in the comparative analysis conducted by Križ and Skivenes (2017) of social workers’ perceptions of child participation in Norway, England, and the USA (California). Securing opportunities for children and young people in vulnerable situations to participate in professional decision-making, which entails finding ways to implement children’s right to be heard and to participate at all levels in organizations working for child welfare, is essential to fully recognizing children’s justified claims to dignity and self-worth. To reach this point, Kosher and Ben-Arieh (2019) argues that ‘A new theory is needed’ (p. 7).

## 5. Limitations

For this review, we included articles that approached the following question: What are the experiences of children and young people in contact with child welfare services with respect to being heard and participating in decisions concerning their own well-being? Some of the participants of these articles were reflecting on their experiences in retrospect, allowing for reflections and understandings not necessarily present at the time of their contact with child welfare services. The findings should be interpreted with this in mind.

A common limitation when conducting research on child participation, especially children’s degree of participation, is that the concept has a multitude of definitions (Leeson 2007; Bessell 2011; Fitzgerald and Graham 2011; Paulsen 2016; Vis et al. 2011). Comparisons between studies can therefore be challenging. Another limitation of this study is that only qualitative studies were included, though the total number of children and young people participating in the included studies (151) was sufficient for the findings to reinforce the patterns identified across the studies. For stronger reinforcement, additional articles could have been included by searching additional databases or using additional search terms.

All included studies in this review were conducted in a Western context of child protection and child welfare, which is not necessarily comparable to or representative of that in other parts of the world.



## 6. Conclusion

Based on this systematic literature review of children's experiences of participation in child welfare decision-making, we recommend the operationalization of children's right to be heard and to participate on the basis of the participation theory developed by Skivenes and Strandbu (2006).<sup>8</sup> In line with Skivenes and Strandbu and inspired by the Committee (2009), we define participation as a four-step procedure; (1) access to information, (2) opportunities to express views in various forms and channels, (3) equal evaluation of arguments, and (4) opportunities to appeal to an independent body.

Implementing this procedure would not act as a guarantee of participation, given that it unfolds in human interactions open to failures and misunderstandings. Nevertheless, following these steps could facilitate meaningful participation for children in contact with welfare institutions and help to overcome the organizational and individual factors hindering participation that were identified in this review. The organizational factors identified by the reviewed articles as hindering participation were limited time for social workers to perform their work, limited knowledge on rights issues, and limited guidance from the local institution on how to operationalize participation (Husby et al. 2018; Cossar et al. 2016; Bessell 2011; Paulsen 2016; Fitzgerald and Graham 2011). The individual factors and characteristics of social workers identified as facilitating child participation were empathy, a capacity to create trust, and giving recognition to the child (Cossar et al. 2016; Husby et al. 2018; Križ and Roundtree-Swain 2017; Fitzgerald and Graham 2011; Dillon et al. 2016; Paulsen 2016; Damiani-Taraba et al. 2018). In addition, perceived vulnerability of children in contact with child welfare services (Križ and Skivenes 2017) is an important issue to work with to overcome the gap between voice and participation (Sandberg 2015).

To genuinely improve children's chances of being heard and to participate, a thorough legal framework is required at local, national, and international levels,<sup>9</sup> backed by a step-by-step procedure of participation. The importance of effectively operationalizing these rights is confirmed throughout the literature. As the participants in the youth-led project included in this study made clear, the right to be heard and to participation is 'the foundation upon which other rights are built' (Damiani-Taraba et al. 2018: 91).

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## Supporting information

The appendix offers information on how the included studies were critically appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (2018).

8 Further described in the introduction.

9 We thank an anonymous reviewer for this most valuable remark.

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## Appendix

Based on checklist evaluated by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (2018)

Author (year) Country	Was there a clear statement of aims?	Is a qualitative Method(s) appropriate?	Research design appropriate to address the aims of the study?	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the study?	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Is there a clear statement of findings?	How valuable is the research?
1. <a href="#">Bessell (2011)</a> Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	The study has value
2. <a href="#">Fitzgerald and Graham (2011)</a> Australia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	The study has value
3. <a href="#">Cossar et al. (2016)</a> United Kingdom	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	The study has value
4. <a href="#">Dillon et al. (2016)</a> United Kingdom	(yes)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	(yes)	The study has value
5. <a href="#">Paulsen (2016)</a> Norway	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	The study has value
6. <a href="#">Križ and Roundtree-Swain (2017)</a> USA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	The study has value
7. <a href="#">Damiani-Taraba et al. (2018)</a> Canada	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	The study has value
8. <a href="#">Fylkesnes et al. (2018)</a> Norway	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	The study has value
9. <a href="#">Husby et al. (2018)</a> Norway	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	The study has value