

The rights and well-being of Estonian children in substitute care

Judit Strömpl, PhD University of Tartu

Thematic importance: Children removed from their birth family create an especially vulnerable group among other children. Measures to improve the quality of substitute care in Estonia is discussed in presentation.

Introduction and objectives: In Estonia ca 300 children are removed from their birth family every year and ca two third of them are placed into substitute care. In 2020 there were 3,052 children (11.9 per 1,000 of child population) in public care. Estonian child protection policy aim is to guarantee equal rights and well-being to all children living in Estonia. However, the effect of policy and its implementation in practice needs more profound and critical analysis and more innovative helping measures. Analyzing the Estonian substitute care, one can find that there is little attention paid on trauma-informed care and purposeful support of child agency including unique identity of every child. During participatory action research (PAR), we attempted to introduce trauma-informed life story work (T-ILSW) – until now missing from Estonian child protection system. The aim of this paper is to present some preliminary findings of first phase of PAR, focusing on two main questions:

1. How the child's rights and well-being are guaranteed in Estonian substitute care?
2. How ready the Estonian substitute care system is to apply T-ILSW?

Method: The research is designed as a PAR that first phase started in 2020. Voluntary participants – two residential care institutions, one SOS family, two foster and two adoptive family, altogether 14 children (5 boys and 9 girls) between 4 and 15 of age, and an NGO supporting foster families were involved into process so far.

Findings: In the first phase of PAR, during mapping the situation in substitute care the next peculiarities were fixed: first, well-being is understood as creature comforts; second, emphasis on formal and informal education; third, lack of purposeful work with child agency including the development the child's unique identity; fourth, relations with birth family and the child's own life story is ignored; fifth, lack of methods to develop the child's relational self; sixth, lack of trauma-informed care and missing LSW. Accordingly, we started introducing T-ILSW methods to key persons of substitute care (policy makers and managers of institutions and foster parents). During this process, we could face different interest toward T-ILSW as a new measure, starting from very interested and ending with not interested at all. Creating a trustful relation both with children and carers is a time-consuming procedure, however, inevitable part of research. Children in residential care show ignorance to their own life story but are willing to participate in activities that support their self-awareness and senses and talk about their everyday life here and now. These exercises seem to be extremely suitable in developing child's agency.

Conclusion and implications: Today we cannot talk about equal rights and well-being for children in substitute care, because of absence of purposeful measures supporting child agency and identity. T-ILSW seems to be a good measure to fill the gap.