

# **“Strength-based approaches and child protection: conflicting paradigms or the key to improve interventions?”**

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Background In the Netherlands there is a growing public support for preventive approaches and safety precautions regarding child protection.[1] Risk-aversion led to a 153% increase of children placed under supervision in 2010.[2] Family guardians increasingly use standardized and positivist evidence-based methods that should help them to make ‘right’ decisions regarding the child. Standardization affects the quality of relationships with families (Hermanns, 2008) that, in turn, affects child protection intervention processes and ‘outcomes’ (cf. Parr, 2009). Against the background of supporting and controlling roles of family guardians their (changing) relationship with families is ethnographically studied to assess how child protection work takes places in practice and what is needed to make interventions work better. Methods A triangular approach is used to reveal what is said, written and done during child protection processes (Pithouse, 1998). Ethnographic fieldwork is conducted among fifteen single-mother child protection families between 2009 and 2012 in the Netherlands. The researcher took part as a participant observer in interactions between family guardians and single mothers during e.g. home visits, court hearings and supervised meetings. The analysis draws on concepts from critical discourse analysis. The study also includes interviews, narratives, case files and written reports. Results The study shows that outcomes of child protection interventions are more effective[3] if parents are engaged in, and positive about, the process. Trust, respect and positive treatments of single-mother families are crucial to successful child protection outcomes. Analysis of empirical data shows that mothers are often addressed and treated as ‘multi-problematic’, ‘not capable’ and ‘a risk’ in child protection cases. Deficit-based approaches turn out to impede the family guardian-mother relationship and the outcome of child protection interventions.[4] The results indicate that cooperation, a positive relationship and an agreed plausible explanation for the families’ situation are crucial in determining whether a family guardian recommends for restoring the full parental authority and family reunification. Implications The paper assesses what is needed to improve child protection interventions and debates whether strength-based approaches are commensurable with child protection discourses.

Keywords: Ethnography, Outcomes, Family research, strength-based approaches.[1]