

## **Riitta Vornanen & Pirjo Pölkki**

Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland

**Contact information:** [riitta.h.vornanen@uef.fi](mailto:riitta.h.vornanen@uef.fi), [pirjo.polkki@uef.fi](mailto:pirjo.polkki@uef.fi)

### **Needs, processes and outcomes in child protection**

One fundamental issue in child protection work concerns the best interests of the child. We want to ask how social work with families and children, especially in child welfare and child protection services can optimize the intervention in families and to promote children's well-being. This concern is a practical issue, but also a very fundamental issue on how we succeed in helping children at risk. The general outcomes of social work can be made visible in longitudinal studies of the services although there are always individual unique pathways children have travelled. There is a need for research to increase the theoretical and methodological understanding of the processes, outcomes and effectiveness of child welfare services and to improve the social work practice.

Social work with children and families deals with insecurity and unpredictable circumstances in life. The results concerning the outcomes of services delivered to situations of greatest risk are fragmentary, even contradictory. These sightings were the origins for the project of *Needs, processes and outcomes in child protection*. This project for the years 2008-2011 is being carried out in the University of Eastern Finland and funded by the Academy of Finland. This project is one of the ongoing projects in Finland dealing with social work and its effectiveness.

The project has five sub-studies. The aim of the first of these, *Children's paths into child welfare services and beyond* by Pirjo Pölkki, is to describe and analyze the support from child welfare services for the children at risk of psychosocial problems. The risk and protective factors in the lives of one age cohort (N=492) was followed up from the age 10 to 18 in the 1990s. The support from child welfare services documented in the social office case files is being analysed in connection with the information concerning the competences, problems and life events which has been collected from the pupils, parents and teachers. The questionnaire concerning the resilience of former child welfare clients and a sample of the original cohort will be sent in 2011.

The second sub-study focuses *Outcomes of taking children into care*. This study is carried out by the researcher Heidi Laitinen. The data of the study consists of case files of children, who have been taken into the public care system during the years 1990-1998. The study is a retrospective follow up study, in which the case outcomes and client outcomes are analyzed since the beginning of the engagement with public services into adulthood of those children.

The third sub-study is called *The critical incidents in child-centred assessment in child welfare*. This study by Anne-Mari Jaakola aims at studying the orientation and approaches of assessment

among Finnish child welfare social workers. The data of the study is collected by way of a national survey for all Finnish child welfare social workers. The special interest here is to find out factors which either promote or inhibit successful assessment in child welfare.

The fourth substudy, *One year after the beginning of child welfare open care measures* by Pirjo Pölkki, Janissa Miettinen and Riitta Vornanen, is a prospective longitudinal study of a sample (N=200 children of about 1000 children) of the year 2010 clientele in open care child welfare services. The needs and problems of the clients, as well as the critical factors for successful support, are analysed from the perspectives of social workers and clients.

The fifth sub-study, research by Janissa Miettinen focuses on the *prerequisites of success in child welfare open care*. The aim of this research is to draw together and analyse the knowledge base in social work, especially in conceptual understanding of the factors and mechanisms which contribute to the effectiveness in child welfare open care.

All these sub-studies are focused on the outcomes and effectiveness of child welfare services. The critical incident technique by John Flanagan is used as a methodological idea for analysing the critical factors for positive outcomes. Research on interventions, processes and outcomes must take into account the cultural and social contexts. This project has the context of Finnish child welfare system but also aims at increasing international discourse and cooperation around these issues.