

Through the Eyes of the Child: A Study of Tusla Child Protection and Welfare Intervention

<u>Organisation(s):</u>	The Child and Family Agency (Tusla) and Trinity College Dublin	
<u>Country:</u>	Ireland	
<u>Contact:</u>	policy@esn-eu.org	
<u>Theme:</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> Ageing & Care <input type="checkbox"/> Asylum & Migration <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Young People <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Support for Children & Families <input type="checkbox"/> Community Care <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Integrated Care & Support <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Co-Production <input type="checkbox"/> Disability <input type="checkbox"/> Housing & Homelessness <input type="checkbox"/> Artificial Intelligence <input type="checkbox"/> Digitalisation <input type="checkbox"/> Quality Care	<input type="checkbox"/> Labour Market Inclusion <input type="checkbox"/> Social Inclusion <input type="checkbox"/> Technology <input type="checkbox"/> Workforce and Leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Social benefits <input type="checkbox"/> EU Funding <input type="checkbox"/> Social Service's Resilience <input type="checkbox"/> Mental Health <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Person-centred Care <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other, please specify: Public and Patient Involvement in research
<u>Principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights:</u> <i>Check the 20 principles here.</i>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1. Education, training, life-long learning <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Gender equality <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Equal opportunities <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Active support to employment <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Secure and adaptable employment <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Fair Wages <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Transparent employment conditions <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Social dialogue <input type="checkbox"/> 9. Work-life balance <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Healthy, safe work environment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 11. Childcare and child support <input type="checkbox"/> 12. Social protection <input type="checkbox"/> 13. Unemployment benefits <input type="checkbox"/> 14. Minimum income <input type="checkbox"/> 15. Old age income and pensions <input type="checkbox"/> 16. Health care <input type="checkbox"/> 17. Inclusion of people with disabilities <input type="checkbox"/> 18. Long-term care <input type="checkbox"/> 19. Housing and assistance to homeless <input type="checkbox"/> 20. Access to essential services
<u>Current status of the practice:</u>	<input type="checkbox"/> Concept and Design Phase <input type="checkbox"/> Execution & Monitoring Phase <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consolidation Phase <input type="checkbox"/> Scaling Up and Transformation Phase <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)	
<u>Context/ Social issues addressed</u>	Transformed social meanings and conceptualisations of children mean that children are no longer seen as 'objects of concern' but as active, agentic, social people with the capacity to make sense of their world. This approach to capacity and rights is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which sets out the child's right to express his/her views freely in matters affecting him/her and to have those views given due	

<p><i>Please explain the problem you attempt to solve.</i></p>	<p>weight in accordance with their age and maturity (United Nations, 1989). Understanding children’s experiences of child protection and welfare (CP&W) services is central to a child-centred, rights-based approach to working with children and young people.</p> <p>Informed by a consultation process with young people availing of Tusla services and employing the Lundy Model of participation (Lundy 2007), the research study focused on gaining an understanding of children’s experiences but also went beyond that to understand, from the child’s perspective, what contributed to these experiences. In approaching the research from a child-informed and child-centred perspective, the research design informed by consultation with children and young people privileged the need to understand how children respond to the frontline practices they experience.</p>
<p>Objectives: <i>Please provide a maximum of three objectives in bullet points.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve children’s participation in decision-making in child protection • Understand how professional practice can be more child-centred • Understand what factors can aid or inhibit child protection specialists from ensuring children have meaningful participation.
<p>Activities: <i>Please summarise the activities put in place to achieve the objectives (maximum 200 words).</i></p>	<p>Informed by a consultation process with two groups of children and young people that took place in June 2019, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency in Ireland, commissioned a research study in 2020 to capture the views of children and young people who are the recipients of Tusla Child Protection and Welfare services.</p> <p>This research study was undertaken at three case study sites in Tusla Child and Family Agency’s Child Protection and Welfare Services. The three Tusla Areas for the fieldwork were chosen by the commissioners for the research team, with the selection influenced primarily by the Areas that were considered to have the capacity to provide the support the project would require at local level. (Note the fieldwork phase of the study was delayed due to pandemic and cyber-attack).</p> <p>This study conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 20 children aged 10-17 years and was completed and published in April 2023.</p> <p>The inclusion criteria applied were as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➔ Children aged 10 – 17 years of age on January 1, 2022, who had experienced either initial assessment and/or child protection conference (CPC) or were open to Child Protection and Welfare services in the previous 12-18 months. ➔ The final sample of twenty children who participated in this study comprised 12 females and 8 males, aged between 10 and 18 years old (at the point of interview). <p>Semi-structured individual interviews were employed, capturing the children’s subjective and lived experiences of child protection and welfare services. and providing a point-in-time insight into their lives. The contributions provide a unique insight into what it is like to be a child and experience child protection and welfare involvement. The findings reflect both existing knowledge whilst simultaneously bringing new perspectives on children’s experience in this context.</p> <p>An Action Plan was co-developed, which will further enhance practice in areas including but not exclusive to participatory practice, greater support in the use of specifically designed practice tools, specific attention to enhancing collaboration with the education sector and further areas of priority research.</p> <p>The action plan includes the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All new professional staff will be supported to undertake training in participatory practice as part of their induction to the Agency.

- A national roll-out of 'safety in action' workshops will be commenced to embed expected practice, including a specific focus on the use of agreed practice tools.
- Additional initiatives have been identified and will be developed to promote further integration with Tusla Education and Support Service and Child Protection and Welfare Teams when meeting children in a school context.
- The Agency will host a series of workshops for practitioners focused on further enhancing and supporting 'shame-sensitive practice' in our child protection and welfare work.
- To inform ongoing learning, wider policy and future research, key recommendations emerging from the study on priority areas exploring children's perspectives of our work with them and their families will be agreed, and included in the Research and Information Needs Analysis currently underway and will form part of future commissioned research plan as part of the Agency 's Research Strategy 2024-2029.

A **Dissemination plan**, which includes peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations, has been drawn up and is in train.

- One article has been submitted to the journal *Children and Youth Services Review (Impact Factor 2.519)* based on the literature review conducted for the study. A further four peer reviewed publications are in progress, with each member of the four-member research team taking lead responsibility for one article.
- Second article due for submission to *Child Abuse and Neglect* on February 29th for a special issue on children's participation.
- The journals identified for further publications include *Qualitative Research (Impact Factor 3.096)*; *British Journal of Social Work (Impact Factor 2.352)*; and *Health and Social Care in the Community (Impact Factor (2.395)*. The research team and the commissioners are also considering a joint peer reviewed publication to reflect on the research process.
 - Two abstracts were accepted for and presented at the National Child Protection and Welfare Conference in Cork in October 2023. One paper focused on key findings while the second focused on the lessons learned from commissioning and conducting research.
 - An abstract was submitted for and presented at the National Psychological Society of Ireland Conference in Cork November 2023 and focused on lessons learned from commissioning and partnering in research,
 - A further two abstracts were submitted and accepted for the European Conference on Social Work Research in Lithuania April 2024
- The research team and commissioners have met with the three gatekeepers for the fieldwork stage of the research and plan feedback sessions with the 20 participating children and young people.
- An infographic of the key findings aimed at children and young people and for publication in Tusla offices nationwide has been developed and will be disseminated widely.

An **Agency-wide webinar** was held in May 2023, where the research team presented the key findings (summarised above), with responses from knowledge and practice expert panel members, including government policy officials, children's rights experts and senior practitioners. The views of a wide range of practitioners were also captured. This webinar was recorded and is available for staff to view. Anecdotal evidence tells us that this webinar is being used across Tusla staff for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) purposes.

Evaluation of practice:

Please explain how you evaluate the practice, and what the results were/are so far

The project was a research study and, therefore, is not subject to evaluation.

Key findings:

- Overall, many of the children considered that involvement with Tusla had had a positive impact on their lives.
- Children disclosed that fear, stigma and misunderstandings about Tusla’s role can act as barriers to their engagement with services.
- First contact with Tusla was recalled as a time of fear and uncertainty. The children described being worried about what might happen in their family once Tusla was involved.
- Children reported a lot of stress around the risk of losing face among peers should their Tusla involvement become ‘public’, particularly in the school setting. These worries and fears could make it harder for them to understand what was going on.
- The children reported that meaningful conversations with trusted professionals who provide opportunities for them to have a say in what was going on is the best way to facilitate child participation - being listened to was more important than getting what they wanted.
- The children were also very clear that trust was both hard to build and easy to lose. Trust is easily undermined by any turnover of staff.
- Open and honest communication paired with child-friendly communication tools (e.g. Signs of Safety tools) were identified by children as the best way to build trust and overcome barriers to engagement
- Children’s responses demonstrate the need for more joined-up thinking between child protection services and the wider child protection and welfare eco-system in the child’s life.

The findings have been subject to the following considerations:

The study has further reinforced findings from the Agency’s implementation data, which has highlighted the need to strengthen the breadth and depth of safety planning practice, including the use of practice tools to support children’s understanding, such as words and pictures.

Links to supporting documents:

e.g. website or report of the practice

Holt, S., Gilligan, R., Caffrey, L. & Brady, E. (2023). Through the Eyes of the Child: A Study of Tusla Child Protection & Welfare Intervention. Dublin: School of Social Work & Social Policy, TCD and Tusla, The Child & Family Agency. Child & Family Agency. <https://doi.org/10.25546/102433>

Report
https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Through_the_Eyes_of_a_Child.pdf

Holt, S., Gilligan, R., Caffrey, L. & Brady, E. (2023). Through the Eyes of the Child: A Study of Tusla Child Protection & Welfare Intervention – A Research Briefing. <https://doi.org/10.25546/102499>

Briefing
https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Through_the_Eyes_of_a_Child_-_Research_Briefing.pdf

Comments and tips, i.e. for people willing to use your Practice

people willing to use your Practice

This study is centrally focused on the direct experiences of children who have experienced child protection and welfare interventions with an aim to inform better how our practice can be more child-centred and what are the factors that aid or inhibit us from ensuring children have meaningful participation in the decision-making process that affect them. This ground-breaking research study makes an important contribution to what is a relatively small international knowledge base on how children experience the intervention of child

protection services. The key learnings from the study can, therefore, importantly contribute to enhancing knowledge on best practices, not only domestically but also internationally.

Some **tips** for others seeking to undertake research of this nature:

1. Ensure early engagement with children in co-design, and don't make assumptions that you know how to explore their experiences. Inquire before you require anything from them, as they have informed perspectives.
2. Establish a steering group with people with expert knowledge to guide and act as a support network to brainstorm and make collective decisions, particularly regarding ethical and data protection considerations. In our study, this expertise came from across the service and those with research expertise and kept us focused on our goal and solutions to get there. Having consistent, strong leadership from a sponsor or lead manager is also essential.
3. Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) and ethical processes are complex and tend, in our experience, to be risk adverse, so we had to consider:
 - a. Bespoke ethical process with expertise that both understood our goal and supported our approach in the research methodology
 - b. Be informed by legal and data protection advice but focus on the goal of ensuring children's perspectives are essential and are part of being a rights-based organisation.
4. Flexibility is required in contract management and development of the final report to reflect the partnership approach. Namely:
 - a. Build-in time flexibility as unexpected delays will occur. Agree early on intellectual property rights and maintain flexibility in the approach.
 - b. Research findings are independent but consider co-produced recommendations that are meaningful and implementable.