

## **Engelberg Center for Children and Youth**

# **Parental Representation in the Child Protection Decision-Making Processes of the Social Services – Literature Review about Five European Countries**

Ravit Alfandari

The study was commissioned by the Service for Children and Youth in the Division for Personal and Social Services and the Division for Research, Planning and Training at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and Services

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# **Abstract**

## **Background**

There is a consensus among policymakers, professionals and researchers around the world as to the importance and advantages of partnership in working with parents in child protection. Meaningful partnership enhances the quality of decisions regarding the help provided to children who are suffering or likely to suffer from significant harm from abuse or neglect and to their families, and contributes to better outcomes for them. However, the literature persistently reports difficulties in establishing partnership in everyday child protection practice. This review examines one of the ways proposed to promote partnership with parents in the decision-making process about their children, which is to allow them to be represented or supported by an independent person acting on their behalf.

## **Goal**

The goal of the review was to provide in-depth understanding about the possibilities and outcomes of representation, by analyzing the policy and practice in different countries around the world where there is a decision-making framework similar to the one in Israel. In particular, the review examined the extent of formal regulation for representation; Who is allowed to represent the parents? What are the practical aspects of representation? And what are the implications of representation for all those involved in the decision-making process? Using the systems approach as a conceptual framework, representation in each of the countries was studied within the context of the child protection system in which it is implemented.

## **Methods**

The process of reviewing the literature was conducted over three months in 2017. The study data were collected systematically in four stages: An initial search of the research literature using relevant key words and databases; screening the results by the key criterion of resemblance to the characteristics of the Israeli decision-making framework; gaining a broader, in-depth knowledge about relevant countries; and ending the search at saturation point. Data were taken from empirical papers published in international journals, books, government websites and personal correspondence.

## **Main Findings**

The countries included in this review are: Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and England. A key finding of the literature analysis is that there is great variation among countries in the decision-making process in general and, in particular, in regard to parents' representation. These differences can be seen, for example, in the characteristics and composition of the decision-making body, the type of relationship (personal or professional) between the parent and his/her representative, and the nature and timing of the representative's involvement. Another important finding is the scarcity of empirical knowledge on parental representation, particularly about its routine utilization and implications. Several possible explanations for this are presented.

## **Conclusion**

In regard to formulating policy about parental representation in child protection decision-making processes, the review concludes that: (1) There is a need for structured working procedures regarding the involvement of an independent person acting for the parents in the decision-making process, that are clear to all those participating in it. These procedures should be compatible with the characteristics of the child protection system that shape the relationship between parents, social worker and agencies; (2) The person representing the parent should be sufficiently trained and knowledgeable in the field of child protection; and (3) The possibilities of representation given to the children themselves must be taken into account and must be examined to see if and how they fit in with those given to their parents. Substantial research into these issues is critical in order to develop effective policy.

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