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How could you help me? Children's voices on violence in child welfare files: A thematic analysis

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ABSTRACT

Background: A significant number of children experience violence, frequently from parents or other caregivers. Yet, many of these children lack access to community support, largely due to the challenges they face in disclosing abuse. Even when children do disclose abuse, it does not necessarily lead to their receiving the help needed. Recognizing children as epistemic subjects is essential both for ensuring their access to adequate support and for advancing knowledge about child abuse.
Objective: This study aimed to explore children's voices on violence in child welfare files to enhance our understanding of their experiences of violence.
Participants and setting: The sample consisted of 120 children who provided abuse information in Swedish child welfare investigations into physical and sexual abuse.
Method: Data were collected from child welfare files and analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis.
Results: Six themes were identified—acts of violence, emotions, context, disclosure, agency, and abuse dynamics—all of which informed the overarching theme: Children's voices highlight violence as a specific problem characterized by power and control dynamics that significantly impact their lives.
Conclusions: The collective findings indicate that mechanisms of violence extend beyond physical acts, emphasizing the need for Child Welfare Services (CWS) to recognize child abuse as a distinct issue characterized by dynamics of power and control. These dynamics significantly affect children's health and their capacity to assert their own interests. Failure to address these aspects risks underestimating the severity of the violence and impeding the provision of adequate support.

1. Introduction

This article addresses children's experiences of violence by analyzing their voices in the files of Child Welfare Services (CWS) within the Swedish context. A significant number of children in Sweden—and globally—are subjected to various forms of violence, frequently from parents or other caregivers (Jernbro et al., 2023; cf. Hillis et al., 2016). Beyond immediate health risks, adverse childhood experiences—such as physical and sexual abuse—are associated with long-term negative consequences for physical, mental, and social health (Norman et al., 2012; Campbell et al., 2016; Felitti, 2019). In Sweden, it is estimated that 29% of children experience some form of parental violence, with 13.5% subjected to physical abuse and 0.8% to sexual abuse (Jernbro et al., 2023). Although CWS is responsible for managing child abuse cases, many of these children do not have access to community support (Jernbro et al., 2023; Kassman et al., 2023). A primary barrier to children accessing protection, support, and treatment is their reluctance to disclose abuse. Research consistently shows the significant difficulties children face in disclosing abuse and their frequent inability to do so (Gilbert et al., 2009; Hershkowitz et al., 2005; Jernbro et al., 2017). However, studies focusing on particularly vulnerable children interacting with CWS indicate that it is relatively common for these children to communicate their experiences of violence (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Linell, 2017a, 2017b; Thulin et al., 2020; Quarles van Ufford, 2023), challenging the perception that children rarely disclose abuse. It is crucial to note that even when children disclose abuse, it does not necessarily

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ensure they receive the protection, support, and treatment they need. Findings from previously published studies analyzing the handling of child abuse by Swedish CWS indicate that children's reported experiences are frequently dismissed: in 60.1% of CWS investigations, children reported abuse by parents or close relatives, yet protective or supportive measures related to violence were implemented in only 8.2% of investigations (Quarles van Ufford et al., 2022; Quarles van Ufford, 2023).

More than a decade before the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Sweden enacted a prohibition on disciplinary violence. The CRC has since been incorporated into Swedish law (SFS, 2018:1197). Despite these legal advancements, significant challenges persist in effectively protecting children from violence, underscoring the need to prioritize the child rights perspective as delineated by the CRC, with the right to participation being essential for accessing other rights (Leviner, 2014, 2018, 2020; Heimer et al., 2018; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). Moreover, recognizing children as citizens with inherent rights imposes specific demands on research practices. Criticism has been directed at the prevailing tendency to treat children as research subjects (Øverlien & Holt, 2021), highlighting the moral imperative to address the passive research experiences of children through the lens of 'epistemic injustice' (Sarkadi et al., 2023). This injustice encompasses both testimonial injustice, in which children's credibility as knowers is undermined, and hermeneutical injustice, in which there is a lack of understanding and acknowledgment of their lived realities (Fricker, 2007). To effectively address these issues, research should actively involve children—it should be conducted about, with, and by them (Sarkadi et al., 2023). This principle is particularly relevant to research on CWS, where social workers hold significant influence in interpreting children's experiences and needs (cf. Sundhall, 2023). However, directly involving these children in research poses ethical and legal dilemmas. Therefore, alternative methods are necessary to make their voices heard. CWS files contain unique narrative data from children (O'Dea et al., 2020). It is essential to explicitly explore such data to deepen our understanding of their experiences of violence. Although the concept of 'voice' within the field of child participation is debated, and the idea of an 'authentic voice' has been critiqued (Facca et al., 2020), there is a clear imperative for research that centers children's voices to advance knowledge (Sarkadi et al., 2023).

1.1. Context and conditions for acknowledging children's voices on violence

Children's participation is crucial for authorities to detect and protect them from violence (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). However, adequately addressing children's experiences requires navigating complex dynamics that demand attention to issues related to violence and to children's rights to participation, as outlined in Article 12 of the CRC. The CRC recognizes all forms of violence—whether physical or mental, including injury, abuse, neglect, maltreatment, or exploitation (such as sexual abuse)—as a comprehensive assault on children's human dignity and a violation of their human rights (Article 19, CRC). The impact of both single serious acts and repeated violence on children can be profound, making it a significant problem (Lenzer, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006). Yet, it remains a difficult issue to address. Research indicates that disclosing abuse is a complex and often ambivalent process, influenced by cognitive, emotional, and contextual barriers (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Jernbro et al., 2017; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; McElvaney et al., 2014). Moreover, different forms of violence frequently overlap—referred to as poly-victimization—and are more strongly associated with trauma symptoms (Finkelhor et al., 2009; Jernbro & Landberg, 2020; Turner et al., 2017).

The way society discusses and conceptualizes violence shapes the framework for understanding and addressing it and significantly influences the recognition of children's vulnerability (Eriksson, 2023). Notable similarities exist between child abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV), including the presence of multiple forms of abuse, the risk of both physical and emotional harm, an unequal power dynamic, the perpetrator's exploitation of the victim's emotions, and the concealment of abuse within the family (Messing, 2011; Linell, 2017b). In contrast, the dynamics of power and control, and their impact on the victim's health, are often underrepresented in societal understandings of child abuse (Messing, 2011; Linell, 2017b). Violence is frequently perceived as a response to an isolated conflict situation rather than as part of an ongoing pattern of behavior. It has been argued that there is "no logical difference" between child abuse and IPV: Both involve injury and the risk of homicide, occur within an unequal power dynamic, involve victims who lack resources, exploit the victim's love, and use the privacy of the family to conceal the abuse (Messing, 2011). Despite these parallels, child abuse is treated differently, often viewed as primarily a problem for CWS, with a focus on future risk assessment rather than investigating past incidents (Landberg et al., 2021; Messing, 2011). This approach risks overlooking the child's perspective, for whom the past, present, and future are interconnected and significant (Landberg et al., 2021). Within child welfare discourse, violence is often subsumed under the broader categories of child neglect and parental incapacity, leading to potential minimization or invisibility of the issue (Mattsson, 2017). The dynamics of power and control are primarily recognized in honor-based violence; however, there is a need to more broadly evaluate these dynamics and their consequences—such as fear, anxiety, guilt, or low self-esteem—since these factors affect children's health and their ability to assert their own interests (Linell, 2017b; Mattsson, 2017).

Determining a child's need for protection, support, and treatment relies not only on adults' views and assessments but also on the child's participation, recognizing the child as a source of knowledge (Eriksson, 2023). Article 12 of the CRC enshrines the legal right to participation, allowing children to express their views on matters affecting them and ensuring these views are given due weight. The CRC's potential lies in challenging traditional socio-cultural views that depict children as vulnerable and incompetent, often ignoring their views and agency (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Through the right to participation, children are recognized as autonomous subjects with agency. However, genuine child participation is seldom realized in practice, as discretionary assessments of the child's best interests often result in professionals either silencing or substituting the child's views (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Tisdall, 2015). Additionally, the concept of the autonomous child presents its own challenges. Autonomy is frequently conceptualized in terms of a rational individual capable of independent decision-making, which risks establishing a norm that fails to acknowledge differences among children (Reynaert & Roose, 2015). For example, failing to recognize that the dynamics of abuse can inhibit children's ability to advocate for their own interests creates significant inequalities (Quarles van Ufford, 2023). When autonomy, competence, and rationality are seen as normatively desirable, rights may be available only to those deemed to have the appropriate type of agency or competence (Leviner, 2020; Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019; Tisdall, 2012). Furthermore, when participation is limited by professionals' constructs of the child, epistemic injustice occurs (Knezevic, 2017). Previous research has shown that the professional's narrative approach in transforming children's information into the "written investigation" influences how children's experiences and needs are understood (Sundhall, 2023). The presentation of the child's information in the investigative text affects the child's visibility and has consequences for access to protection and support. The investigative text can either contribute to decisions that protect the child or construct the child as an object, thereby undermining the child's right to participation. Professionals can either validate or invalidate children's experiences of violence by the way they formulate the investigative text; invalidation occurs when professionals reformulate the child's information into something else or ignore it (Sundhall, 2023; cf. Macdonald, 2017; Heimer et al., 2018).

1.2. Aims and objectives

This article is part of a project that analyzes the handling of physical and sexual abuse of children by Swedish CWS (Quarles van Ufford et al., 2022, 2024; Quarles van Ufford, 2023). To advance our understanding of children's experiences of violence and the conditions affecting their access to support, it is crucial to explore their voices in contrast to professionals' assessments of their vulnerability. Children's testimonies are essential not only for providing adequate support but also for guiding the development and implementation of social, health, and welfare policies and practices (Mayall, 2000). By focusing on children's voices within CWS files, this article aims to explore their experiences of physical violence, including sexual abuse, by parents or close relatives, with the overarching question: What insights do children's voices in CWS files provide about child abuse?

2. Method

2.1. Sample

This study is part of a multi-study project conducted in a region in central Sweden, encompassing three medium-sized municipalities with a total population of 99,316 inhabitants, 21% of whom were children aged 0–17 years. These municipalities had the highest number of CWS reports of physical and sexual abuse and were therefore strategically selected to ensure diversity and breadth of cases (see Quarles van Ufford et al., 2022). The original sample included all CWS reports from 2018 of direct physical or sexual abuse of children (aged 0–17 years) by a parent or close relative, resulting in 291 CWS reports (93.5% of which referred to physical violence) concerning 211 children (116 boys and 95 girls) handled within 208 CWS investigations. From this sample, CWS investigations in which children themselves provided information about exposure to violence were selected. Consequently, the current study includes a total of 125 investigations concerning 120 children (73 boys and 47 girls, aged 3–17 years). This gender distribution differs from Swedish national prevalence survey data, which show higher reporting of violence among girls (Jernbro et al., 2023). In contrast, a comparison of national self-reported prevalence studies and children investigated by Swedish CWS indicates an underrepresentation of sexual and psychological abuse in CWS reports and highlights the need for methodological developments to reach particularly vulnerable groups, such as sexually abused girls (Kassman et al., 2023). The lower percentage of girls in the current study sample may thus indicate that their exposure was to other types of violence and/or was less known to CWS. However, it should be noted that this study did not aim to specifically address gender or other intersectional aspects within the group of children; rather, its focus was on children's voices regarding violence (with reasonable gender representation). The study's focus was motivated by the need to highlight general aspects of child abuse. Highlighting children's collective voices on violence challenges age-related power structures that typically assign children a low epistemic status and contribute to concealing violence (cf. Fricker, 2007; Knezevic, 2017; Sundhall, 2023). Accordingly, this study was based on a purposive sample of children subjected to CWS investigations of physical and sexual abuse.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

All CWS reports and associated materials—including investigations, records, professional statements, police interviews, assessments, and decisions—were obtained from the participating CWS agencies. Each child's file comprised approximately 20–100 pages. All files are protected by confidentiality in accordance with the Act on Public Access and Confidentiality (2009:400). Through a meticulous review of these materials, each child's own information about violence was identified and transcribed into separate documents, with contextual markers included. The resulting data were then subjected to qualitative analysis using thematic analysis with an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). To approach the data, close reading was employed, and initial preliminary codes were developed to establish a supportive coding framework. Each child's information was then coded according to these preliminary codes, which were further expanded with new codes and subcodes to refine the content. The coding was organized in tabular form. Through a step-by-step subsumption of codes with common overarching aspects, patterns were identified that addressed children's descriptions of violent acts (including information about the perpetrator), emotions, contexts of abuse, challenges in disclosure, agency, and the dynamics of abuse. This process resulted in the identification of six main themes. Each theme was named based on its manifest content to ensure that the names accurately reflected the information provided by the children. The identified themes were then further analyzed to distill an overarching main theme that synthesized the aggregated information. To minimize interpretation risks, given that response validation was not feasible, the focus was on the actual information provided by the children. Ensuring textual fidelity was central to this approach. To accurately represent the children's information, considerable emphasis was placed on adhering to the explicit content, using verifying and illustrative quotes, and highlighting diverse perspectives, all while maintaining ongoing reflection on the research process. Data coding and analysis were conducted by a single researcher, whereas the coding framework and analysis process were collaboratively developed and discussed by the research team.

2.3. Data source considerations

The challenges and risks associated with analyzing children's voices in CWS files must be explicitly addressed, as the information is reproduced by others, with each reproduction introducing potential for interpretive bias. While CWS files are a valuable resource for research (O'Dea et al., 2020), they are primarily designed to meet the needs of CWS, and their quality depends on the thoroughness and accuracy of the documentation. Social workers also have the authority to select, interpret, and assess the collected information for the final written decision basis of the investigation. During the investigation process, however, all relevant information must be documented, and written submissions must be appended to the social record (Social Services Act, 2001:453). Consequently, this study utilized the complete file material, including written reports from external sources, which often contained well-documented information and appended interview or conversation transcripts. This comprehensive approach enabled data control through triangulation, thereby minimizing the risk of bias from potential exclusions or misinterpretations by CWS. Nonetheless, limitations arise from the inherent difficulty of capturing the children's actual life situations, which may involve aspects not reflected in the files. Additionally, other power strategies, rather than solely a high degree of physical violence, can be effective in the dynamics of abuse (Linell, 2017b). Despite these limitations, the qualitatively rich data provided by the children facilitated a nuanced exploration of these aspects.

2.4. Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Social Welfare Board of the municipalities and the Ethical Review Authority in Sweden, number 2019–04859. All case examples and quotes presented in the current article have been de-identified and, where necessary, specific details about children and suspected perpetrators have been omitted to prevent identification.

3. Results

The analysis of children's voices in the CWS files identified six themes that collectively inform the overarching theme: *Children's voices highlight violence as a specific problem characterized by power and control*

dynamics that significantly impact their lives. These themes are detailed below (3.1–3.6).

3.1. Acts of violence and their characteristics

The children's voices in the files provided detailed insights into the acts of violence and the perpetrators involved. Most children reported experiencing abuse by their father or mother; however, perpetrators also included stepparents, older siblings, grandparents, uncles, and cousins. Additionally, many children reported experiencing abuse from multiple close relatives, typically involving a father or stepfather and a mother or stepmother. Instances of abuse also involved combinations of the mother, stepfather, father, and grandparent. Most children reported being "hit," a term that encompasses various forms of physical aggression, including blows with open hands (e.g., slaps), blows with clenched fists, and blows with objects (e.g., shoehorns, canes, kitchen utensils, and telephone cords). The term "hit" was frequently employed as a broad descriptor for multiple types of violent acts. For instance, one account details that "… [the boy] says that dad sometimes hits him. The last time was the day before yesterday. Dad took him by the throat, and [the boy] points with his hand over the larynx […] dad also grabbed him 'very hard' in his arms and hit the leg with his fists" (2:45:1). Furthermore, actions characterized by less severe terminology could also involve significant violence. For example, the term "pushing" could denote an incident where "dad pushed him to the floor so that he had a concussion and needed to seek emergency care" (2:16:1). In addition to blows, the reported violence included: *kicking* (e.g., mother kicked him in the back, causing his nose to bleed, 1:20:1); *stomping* (e.g., father stomped on him, making him feel as though his "body was broken," 1:34:1); *squeezing across the neck/strangulation* (e.g., mother applied a strangulation hold and released it just before he lost consciousness, 2:4:1); *pounding the head against the wall*; *threatening with a knife; biting; burning with cigarettes or hookah; rubbing chili in the face* (e.g., mother cut a green chili and rubbed it on his face, 2:39:1); *washing the mouth with soap; showering with freezing water* (e.g., father showered him with water that was "colder than snow," causing him to start shivering, 1:34:1); *taping the arms* (e.g., mother restrained his arms behind his back with tape, 1:20:1); *holding fast* (e.g., father restrained him by sitting on him and tightly holding his arms, 2:17:1); *grabbing hard* (e.g., a boy sustained large bruises on his arms from father gripping his arms tightly, 3:14:1); *throwing; pushing; shaking; pulling hair, ears, or nose; grabbing the neck; pinching* (e.g., mother pinched his chest, causing bleeding, 2:16:1); and *scratching/clawing* (e.g., mother scratched him, resulting in scratch marks on his back, 2:63:1). Several children also reported instances of *being locked in or locked out*. For example, one boy was confined to his room with a bucket for urination and defecation (1:20:1), while a girl was repeatedly locked out on a snowy terrace without shoes, wearing only a nightgown (2:94:1). However, reports of sexual abuse by close relatives were exceedingly infrequent among the children. One girl described her older adult brother sexually touching her breasts and bottom and asking her to masturbate for him, as well as subjecting her to physical violence (2:23:1), and a younger child reported that her dad "pees" on her (3:26:1).

The children's voices also provided insights into the frequency and extent of the violence. Most children described experiencing *repeated violence*, which frequently reflected relational patterns involving various forms of abuse within the family network. Many children reported exposure to *multiple forms of violence*, with the most common involving violence directed at siblings and parents. There were also reports of violence against pets and property damage, such as the girl who described her mother throwing her speaker out of the window and then destroying it with an axe (1:28:1). Psychological abuse was frequently reported; it included threats of violence, punishment, control, devaluation, verbal abuse, and derogatory epithets. For instance, one girl described a situation marked by rigid rules, control, devaluation, and violations that led her to feel that there was something "wrong" with her. She reported recurrent panic attacks and self-harming behavior, was instructed not to discuss her situation, and faced demands for detailed accounts of her counseling sessions from her mother, who characterized her as "unbearable as a child" and "disgusting" (2:94:1). Additionally, children reported instances of parental alcohol abuse, mental illness, and neglect, which included being left alone overnight, inadequate nourishment, lack of attention to their well-being, insufficient support for mental health issues, and inadequate protection from abuse. Some children also reported experiencing honor-based violence, including harassment by compatriots and threats or instances of abduction abroad. Moreover, there were reports of bullying, violence, and sexual abuse perpetrated by individuals outside their immediate social circles, including instances where girls were exposed to sexual molestation, rape, and sexual threats on the Internet.

3.2. Emotions associated with violence

The children's voices additionally provided insights into the emotions associated with exposure to violence, *fear* and *sadness* being the most prominent. One example involved a boy who believed his father intended to kill him during an incident of strangulation. In police interrogations, the boy expressed his extreme fear, stating that he had been unable to breathe, became "panicked and terrified," and now constantly worries about whether "dad would strangle me or sit on me again" (2:17:1). Other examples include a girl who texted a social worker, stating, "It almost feels like the next time we die" (2:71:1); a boy who described feeling "scared and sad and usually turns away to escape" (2:79:1); and a girl who reported having "a lump in her stomach" (2:59:1). Many children described *the physical pain and the injuries or marks resulting from the violence*. For instance, one boy detailed: "[Dad] stomped me with his leg so hard that I couldn't lift my arm […] it hurt […] still hurts." He indicated that each time his father struck him, he developed a mark, primarily from a fishing rod, but also noted wounds from a stick and from his father's nails (1:34:1). Other examples include a boy who reported experiencing severe pain after a violent episode, describing it as "the worst in the world" (1:45:1), and a girl who reported that her brother beat her to the extent that she vomited (1:42:1). Beyond immediate fear, sadness, and physical pain, some children reported *feelings of being unloved, suicidal ideation, self-harming behavior, panic attacks, depression, difficulty sleeping, and feelings of "not being able to cope" and "hating their life."* For example, some children expressed sentiments such as "it feels like they [mom and dad] don't want me" (2:80:1), "[I] don't want to live anymore" (2:62:1), and "[I] just wanted to die" (3:26:1). There were also reports of children who had attempted suicide or engaged in self-injury by cutting their wrists, fingers, and hands. The *fear of experiencing further violence* was also evident in the children's accounts. Some reported avoiding going home or running away to escape abuse. One boy described how he tied towels together and climbed out of the bathroom window on the second floor to leave the house (1:44:1). Several children expressed apprehension that school staff might contact their parents in cases of misbehavior, exemplified by one boy who remarked: "Mommy will hit me, hit me, hit me" (2:24:1). Additionally, many children feared their parents' reactions if they disclosed the violence (see Section 3.4). While some children expressed hope that intervention might stop the violence ("if only we get help, it will get better", 1:23:1), others harbored more negative sentiments. Some wished their parents would be kinder, while others voiced more pronounced negative feelings, such as: "daddy's gonna get it back, [he's] mean and stupid" (1:32:1). Several children expressed a preference for not being with the abusive parent or thought that supervised contact would be preferable, as one child stated: "it's good that there is someone else who can stop dad if he gets angry" (2:21:1).

3.3. Context and conceptualized causes of violence

The children's voices also provided insights into their perceptions of

when and why violence occurred, with most children attributing the violence to *the abuser's anger*: "when mom is angry, she hits" (1:15:1) or "when [stepfather] gets angry, he hits me" (1:33:1). Many children described the parent's anger as often stemming from the child being perceived as "stupid/disobedient" or having done something "wrong." Being deemed "stupid/disobedient" could involve failing to listen, arguing with the parent, or engaging in disputes with siblings. Doing something "wrong" might refer to not cleaning the house promptly, forgetting to take out the trash, miscalculating math problems, nail-biting, or eating too slowly. It could also include the child contacting CWS for assistance, as illustrated by one child's account: "our uncle beat us because we contacted you [CWS]" (2:40:1). Additionally, conflicts or differing opinions between children and parents were described as triggers for parental aggression. These conflicts could pertain to issues such as having a relationship with someone from another culture, reluctance to visit the country of origin out of fear of not returning, refusal to go to the summer house, or objections to relinquishing electronic devices. Some children took responsibility for the violence, blaming themselves and attributing the abuse to incidents such as "when I was stupid and didn't behave" (2:57:1). However, several children described the *violence as unpredictable*, highlighting their experiences of not understanding why the violence suddenly occurred: "nothing had happened before dad hit me" (1:45:1); "it's enough to say the wrong word" (2:55:1); "[mom] could come running and open the door in the middle of the night and just rush into the room" (1:28:1); and "according to [the boy], the game ended quickly, [he] didn't realize it was over, dad kicked [him] hard on the leg" (2:124:1). Several children also described that *violence occurred in the absence of others*: "dad closed the door so no one else would see" (2:3:1), and "mom only hits her when no one is watching. On several occasions, mom has hit her when the rest of the family is at home, but mom has gone into [the girl's] room and closed the door so that the others did not notice" (2:30:1).

3.4. Challenges in disclosing violence

The children's voices highlighted the significant challenges associated with disclosing abuse. Many children described explicit prohibitions and threats aimed at preventing them from reporting the abuse. For example, one girl stated that "mom has forbidden me to tell anyone about it" (2:55:1), while another recounted that her mother warned her she would "look at hell" if she discovered she had filed a report (1:27:1). Additional statements revealed instances such as "dad hits him […] and mom says he must not tell anyone" (1:25:1); "dad has said that he will kill him if the family is brought up to CWS again" (2:25:1); and "mom has told [him] that he must not tell that he is actually beaten, because then the police will take him and he will end up in prison" (2:29:1). Prohibitions and threats were closely linked to *fears that disclosure could lead to severe consequences for the child*, including increased exposure to violence and even threats to their life. The files indicated, for instance, that a girl informed school staff that "she is afraid that mom will hurt her when she tells about her situation" (2:120:1); a boy e-mailed CWS, writing, "We could be in danger if it comes out that we have contacted you. […] You really need to protect all the information we have given you, we don't want to be beaten […] he will kill us" (2:40:1); and a girl told her legal representative that "she has been pressured by her father and brother to testify falsely so that her brother will not be convicted and is afraid of what will happen when she gets home" (1:42:1). Additional examples included a girl who told school staff that the abuse should not be reported due to the risk of further exposure (2:43:1), and a boy who did not want his father to know about his disclosure because he was "afraid that dad will kick him again" (2:124:1). Some children also expressed concerns that disclosing the violence might result in negative repercussions for their parents, such as imprisonment. Furthermore, *resistance to disclosure was associated with feelings of shame and emotional attachment to the parent*. For example, one girl told CWS, "it is not a new problem that mom hits [her], but she has not filed a report before because she has been ashamed, and mom is still her mom after all" (2:51:1). Similarly, a boy conveyed that "he understands that it was not right to try to change his own situation as he still wants his mom" (2:4:1).

3.5. Child agency and responses to violence

The children's voices in the files rendered them visible as active agents and underscored their ongoing need to navigate the violence to which they were subjected. By communicating their experiences, the children demonstrated their agency; moreover, this agency manifested in various additional ways. Among these manifestations, a distinction can be made between children who *attempted to manage the abuse independently* and those who *sought help more actively from others*. The former might involve actions such as informing the abuser that hitting is unacceptable, threatening to contact the police, or, as one child stated, "I hit back when he hits me" (1:32:1). Some children reported hiding from the abuser by locking themselves in their rooms or bathrooms or by avoiding being at home. For instance, one boy packed a bag of clothes and left home unnoticed (1:31:1), while a girl ran to a friend's house in her socks (1:12:3). Additionally, several children requested that school staff refrain from contacting their parents in cases of misbehavior (see Section 3.2). However, many children actively sought help from others, frequently confiding in school staff. Instances also included children expressing a desire to contact CWS, such as a boy who requested an immediate report to be filed and wished to meet with CWS on the same day (3:25:1). During CWS investigations, several children articulated their need for assistance or requested placement outside their homes, as exemplified by a girl who emailed, "I would need help now; right now I'm staying with [a friend] because I don't dare go home" (2:93:1). Some children independently contacted the police to seek help or file a report, and there were also instances of children reaching out to the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Women's Shelter. The files also indicated that the children provided feedback and reflected on the help they received or anticipated receiving. For instance, a younger child remarked: "… how could you help me … ? […] if you're going to help me, you must come to my house and tell my dad that he can't hit me" (1:1:1). Similarly, a teenager emailed: "… we really thought you [CWS] would help, you think we're lying, why don't you call us, I still knew we'd never get [help] from you and we're stuck here forever, thanks anyway, thought you would help children who are having a hard time" (2:40:1). There were also instances in which children expressed that the measures had been significant. For example, after a police interview, one boy described it as one of the best days of his life and appreciated that his mentor, who accompanied him, had learned about his father's violence, which helped her better understand his behavior at school. Subsequently, the boy shared with CWS his reaction upon learning that the police investigation had been closed. Initially, he thought no one believed him, but "Mom explained that there is no one who doesn't believe me and that it is common for police investigations to be closed, so then it felt better" (2:17:1).

3.6. Dynamics of child abuse

The children's voices in the files collectively provided insights into the dynamics of abuse, including the unequal power imbalances, the exploitation of the children's emotions, the active concealment of violence, and the processes of adaptation. *The unequal power balance* encompassed elements of physical and psychological dominance, as well as emotional dependence, which were further reinforced by adults either accepting, ignoring, or reframing the violence. The power imbalance was illustrated by a child's response to the question of whether he had told his father not to hit him ("but he does it anyway", 1:1:1), and by statements such as, "Mom says that [the boy] is her child, and she does as she pleases" and "[he] can do nothing about [the violence] anyway" (1:26:1). Many children testified to the other parent's awareness and

passive acceptance of the violence. For instance, one child stated, "Mom has seen dad hit him [but she] hasn't said or done anything to prevent it from happening" (1:24:1). Additionally, they reported that violence occurred in secret. The reframing or legitimizing of the violence by adults contributed to the children's uncertainty about whether or not the acts were wrong. This is illustrated by a girl who recounted her confusion after asking her dad why he hit her and being told, "If you hit someone on the arm, it's not considered hitting" (2:59:1). Similarly, some children reported hearing statements from parents such as, "We're from a culture that allows you to hit your children" (2:93:1). However, the children's voices also revealed how the power imbalance was reinforced and reproduced in their interactions with CWS. For example, one boy confided that he had previously reported physical abuse by his father to CWS but "feels that no one listens to him […] the people he tells think he is lying and choose to trust what dad says" (2:44:1). Similarly, a girl who experienced repeated violence from her mother reported, based on her prior experiences, that she "would like to have her own case manager who doesn't listen mostly to mom" (2:51:1). The *exploitation of the child's emotions* involved both fear (e.g., through threats) and emotional attachment, as illustrated by a girl who described the difficulty of dealing with the situation after her mother learned of her disclosure; her mother was crying, and the girl feared the emotional pressure to come (2:94:1). The children's voices in the files also provided insights into the various ways in which *violence could be concealed*. These included situations where the violence was not acknowledged by—or known to—other family members, where the violence was reframed or legitimized, where children were threatened or forbidden to disclose the violence, and where children withdrew their accounts of abuse. Threats and prohibitions against disclosure often coincided with the children retracting their reports of abuse, particularly after parents were informed of the disclosure. For instance, a boy confided to the school counselor that his mother beat him every day and then burst into tears, saying: "but mom has forbidden me to tell anyone." A few weeks later, the boy and his mother were called to a meeting with CWS, and the record stated that the mother claimed she "never hits her children" and that "[the boy] states that the counselor must have misunderstood him" (2:55:1). The children's voices also revealed the *development of various strategies* for adapting to the constant presence of potential violence. For instance, a girl avoided getting angry at home "because then mom and dad hit me" (1:22:1), and a boy, who was beaten by his father when he was deemed "troublesome," "didn't dare speak but instead whispered" (1:34:1). Other instances include a girl who avoided being at home and locked herself in her room to avoid being sexually molested (2:23:1); a boy who told school staff to be calm so that the mother would not be contacted (2:24:1); and a girl who wanted to eat with a bib to avoid her father's aggression in case she soiled her clothes (2:53:1).

4. Concluding discussion

This study provides critical insights into children's experiences of violence, essential for advancing our understanding of child abuse and the processes of disclosure. It carries significant implications for how child abuse should be understood and addressed by child protection and welfare authorities. Recognized as epistemic subjects, children's voices provide information on acts of violence, emotions, context, the challenges of disclosure, agency, and the dynamics of abuse. All these aspects are encapsulated under the overarching theme: *Children's voices highlight violence as a specific problem characterized by power and control dynamics that significantly impact their lives*. This knowledge, derived from children's statements, is of utmost importance for increasing understanding of child abuse and facilitating access to appropriate support.

Children's collective voices in the CWS files testified to the profound impact of violence, revealing patterns of relationships marked by violence and multiple exposures. The presence—or risk—of multiple potentially adverse childhood experiences was noted, implying an increased risk of serious long-term negative health impacts (Felitti et al., 2019; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Turner et al., 2017). For many children, violence appeared to be a constant reality, with the ongoing threat of physical harm prompting the development of various coping strategies. Overall, children's accounts indicated that violence was not a series of isolated incidents; rather, the mechanisms of violence extended beyond physical acts, resembling patterns seen in IPV. The children's experiences were characterized by dynamics of power and control, involving unequal power balances, exploitation of emotions, concealment of violence, and adaptation to violent environments. These findings clearly demonstrate that child abuse should not be viewed or treated as isolated incidents—an approach that is common in societal understandings of child abuse (Messing, 2011; Linell, 2017b). Viewing violence as a single, isolated act—without addressing its recurring nature and the underlying dynamics of power and control—diminishes the severity of the violence and invalidates the child's experience. The collective findings underscore the importance of recognizing child abuse as a distinct issue characterized by these dynamics. This understanding was reinforced by frequent threats and prohibitions against disclosure, as well as instances in which children withdrew their reports of violence, highlighting the critical but narrow window for CWS to intervene following a child's disclosure. These findings offer crucial insights into how CWS should respond to violence, particularly in terms of immediate protection assessments. CWS must initially request, attentively listen to, and genuinely value children's experiences, addressing their specific needs; otherwise, there is a risk that children may be silenced or retract their disclosures. Another vital aspect of supporting children's disclosure processes involves validating their experiences of violence, exemplified by the boy who described his police interview as one of the best days of his life. For children to effectively navigate their experiences, emotions, and develop strategies to manage their life situations, it is essential that their experiences are acknowledged and affirmed (Leira, 2002; cf. Eriksson, 2012; Bergman & Eriksson, 2018). Recognizing and validating children's experiences can be viewed as a facet of epistemic justice (cf. Fricker, 2007).

Children's reported experiences of violence, it must be noted, sharply contrasted with their recognition in CWS assessments and decisions: Despite overcoming the initial threshold for disclosure, their accounts of abuse were systematically overlooked or invalidated (Quarles van Ufford, 2023). Using Fricker's (2007) terminology, such handling can be understood as epistemic injustice with significant implications for access to protection, support, and treatment for children, underscoring the importance of not limiting children's participation based on how professionals construct and define them (Knezevic, 2017). Viewing children as competent actors and epistemic subjects does not negate the need for adult protection and support (Eriksson, 2012; Lenzer, 2015; Reynaert & Roose, 2015). Rather, the study findings indicate a nuanced understanding is required, acknowledging children as both vulnerable and capable, necessitating resources to exercise their agency and rights. This need is exemplified by the boy whose poignant question, "How could you help me?" is reflected in the article's title. The boy himself answered the question he posed to the professional: His response indicated that the only way the professional could assist him was by coming to his house and instructing his father not to hit him. In a broader sense, this highlights that children require practical assistance from adults to stop the violence—and thus, adults must genuinely listen to the child.

Participation, protection, and support are closely intertwined, with the ability of children to participate being strongly influenced by conditions that foster a safe and inclusive space for expressing their views. A positive, trusting, and stable relationship with the case worker is instrumental in this process (Kennan et al., 2018). The low incidence of reported sexual abuse in the current study prompts reflection on the essential conditions for children's participation and the significant obstacles they encounter in disclosing such abuse, including the lack of a confidant and fear of disbelief (Hershkowitz et al., 2007; Katz et al., 2020). Understanding children's responses to abuse, along with facilitating repeated interview sessions, is critical for detecting instances of

abuse (Hershkowitz et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2020). Equally important is the willingness of professionals to involve children in investigative processes. However, existing research suggests that social workers, influenced by the socio-cultural view of the vulnerable child, may be reluctant to engage them in cases of child abuse (van Bijleveld et al., 2015). Furthermore, prevalent beliefs among social workers may discourage direct questioning of children about violence (Quarles van Ufford et al., 2024). Avoiding addressing violence can be understood as a passive invalidation of children's experiences; when children are denied the opportunity to articulate their experiences of violence, their ability to interpret and comprehend these experiences is restricted (Leira, 2002). Even passive or absent responses to children withdrawing information about abuse can be viewed as invalidation, prompting the critical question: What are the consequences when children disclose but are gradually silenced? The voices of children in the CWS files did not provide answers to this question, as their withdrawal of abuse-related information was followed by silence. Nonetheless, actions by CWS were evident: Previous findings in the current multi-study project (Quarles van Ufford, 2023) revealed that CWS did not critically examine children's withdrawal of information, failing to see this withdrawal in relation to the inhibiting effects of abuse dynamics on their ability to assert their own interests. Instead, this information was used to justify decisions claiming no need for protection or support, thereby legitimizing decisions that risked returning the child to an existing pattern of violence. Beyond the risks of ongoing violence and even endangerment to children's lives, such decisions result in missed opportunities for children to have their experiences validated—a critical aspect for them to interpret, understand, and process adverse experiences (cf. Leira, 2002)—thus impeding their recovery process.

4.1. Limitations

This study relied on children's information obtained from CWS files, limiting the data to what the children communicated and what was documented, potentially overlooking aspects of their life situations (see further 2.3). The study sample also included a low incidence of reported sexual abuse (see 2.1). While this observation aligns with research indicating the underrepresentation of sexual abuse cases in CWS (Kassman et al., 2023), the limited number of reports restricted the depth of understanding of children's experiences with this type of violence. Additionally, the study did not address intersectional aspects among children, such as gender, ethnicity, or functional differences (see e.g., Thomas et al., 2023), focusing instead on broader aspects of child abuse (see 2.1). Consequently, variations in children's experiences based on factors such as age and gender were not explored, and the study does not make claims in this regard.

4.2. Implications for practice

Children's voices in CWS files challenge the perception of child abuse as isolated incidents. Instead, they underscore the necessity of recognizing violence as a distinct issue characterized by power dynamics that affect both children's health and their ability to assert their own interests. For CWS to effectively address the needs of these children, it is crucial to recognize them as both vulnerable and competent individuals who need support to actively participate and exercise their agency. Ensuring adequate conditions for children's participation, including protection from ongoing violence, is essential. CWS must prioritize listening to children, validating their experiences, and responding to their actual needs to prevent potential silencing. Moreover, addressing violence in ways that allow children to express their experiences is critical. Instances in which children retract abuse disclosures should not be dismissed but reconsidered in light of the inhibiting effects of abuse dynamics on their ability to advocate for themselves. Improving the conditions for children's participation in these situations is imperative.

4.3. Implications for research

To advance our understanding of the realities faced by children, it is essential to recognize and empower them as both research subjects and active participants in research. There is a distinct need for targeted and purposive research samples to illuminate the conditions experienced by children in vulnerable situations, particularly those within CWS. Additionally, research must address both the broad aspects of child abuse and the specific intersectional factors—such as age, gender, ethnicity, and functionality—that critically shape children's experiences. While the 'first wave' of the new sociology of childhood faced criticism for potentially homogenizing children and overlooking their diversity (Jenks, 2004; Prout, 2005; Thorne, 2004), it is equally important to recognize the risk of neglecting child abuse as a pervasive phenomenon. Failing to acknowledge child abuse as a widespread issue risks obscuring its significance as a major problem affecting children collectively.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Sara Quarles van Ufford: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis. **Ulla-Karin Schön:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Maria Heimer:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Hanna Linell:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Data availability

The data used are confidential.

Statement

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT in order to refine the phrasing. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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