



Article

The Discourse on the “Dangerous Child Welfare Parent”—How Contact with Parents Is Constructed as a Risk for Children Under Public Care in Norway

Hilde Anette Aamodt * and Marianne Buen Sommerfeldt

Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy OsloMet—Oslo Metropolitan University, 0167 Oslo, Norway; marias@oslomet.no

* Correspondence: haamo@oslomet.no

Abstract: This article discusses contact and interaction between children, siblings and parents after a care order. We have collected and analyzed audio recordings of discussions between child welfare employees in Norway. In these meetings, the employees discuss and decide the extent and organization of visits and contact between parents and children under public care. Visitation mainly emerges as a risk in the discussions and thus as something that must be limited. This article shows how this risk can be seen in the context of a political or moral discourse in which these parents are given an identity and a position as “dangerous”. However, there are some exceptions. In these exceptions, parents emerge as significant and important, and contact is seen as an opportunity for the child. Here, it is the risk of not having contact that stands out.

Keywords: governance; political discourse; foster care; social work



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1. Introduction

This article is about how contact between parents and children under public care is seen as a risk in Norway. As of November 2023, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled that Norway has violated the right to family life in a total of 25 cases processed (NIM 2024). A recurring theme is visitation arrangements that have not sufficiently facilitated future reunification with the parents. When children are under public care, children and parents have the right to access and have contact with each other under section 7-1 of the Child Welfare Act. This is in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasizes children’s right to maintain regular contact with their parents (Barnevernsløven 2021; Barnekonvensjonen (Convention on the Rights of the Child) 1989, art. 9.3) and the right to family life under Article 8 of the Convention on Human Rights (Menneskerettsloven (Human Rights Act) 1999).

A fundamental premise that follows from the practice of the European Court of Human Rights is that a custody order is temporary, with the consequence that the state has an obligation to facilitate the child’s reunification with the parents. Contact with parents is a means of achieving this goal.

Several studies have shown how children in public care yearn for a stronger connection to family, relatives and community (Biehal 2014; Cashmore and Paxman 2006; Cashmore and Talyor 2017; Sen and Broadhurst 2011; Aamodt and Mossige 2014, 2018). A recent review of children’s perceptions of contact shows that many children want more contact with their parents (Huseby-Lie 2023). Visitation is also intended to fulfill children’s right to

maintain family relationships and cultural identity even if they can no longer live with their parents (Barnekonvensjonen (Convention on the Rights of the Child) 1989, art. 9.3, 30).

There are also studies that have examined parents' perspectives on contact (Clapton 2020; Bullen et al. 2017; Fargas-Malet et al. 2010; Ross et al. 2017). Among other things, one study shows how parents perceive contact as artificial and poorly organized. This study also shows that the parents' experience of contact is not sought or valued (Clapton et al. 2022). There are also studies that emphasize the importance of children having contact with their parents after a care order (Independent Review of Children's Social Care 2021).

In studies related to visitation decisions, it is particularly emphasized that individual assessments must be made (Alvik 2021; Boyle 2017; National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen 2020); Stang and Baugerud 2018; Stang et al. 2023; Taplin 2005), and that these must be adjusted in line with the child's development and needs (Bullen et al. 2015; Mapp 2002; Sen and Broadhurst 2011).

When parents are deprived of custody of their children, the Child Welfare Service must decide and assess what contact the child should have with their parents. The child welfare service must therefore submit a proposal for the scope of contact to the Child Welfare Tribunal when they decide to submit a case for taking the child into care. We have previously shown how the content and scope of contact are defined by the child welfare service's established expectations of the purpose of the contact, as well as how the child welfare service's notions of parenthood determine the decisions on contact (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2022, 2024). We have also shown how child welfare employees' understandings of culture have an impact on their assessments of contact (Sommerfeldt and Aamodt 2024). In this article, we show how the Child Welfare Service's view of child welfare parents determines the content and extent of contact. Parents who can no longer have custody of their children are identified as being "dangerous" to the child. This label may have a greater impact on the decisions on contact than the reasons for the care order. When constructing parents as dangerous, very limited contact follows. The opposite view is possible, that not having contact with the parents could pose a risk to the child. The question we ask is as follows: *how does contact between parents and children in public care emerge as a risk in child welfare employees' discussions?*

A number of studies show how child welfare services are governed by risk thinking and how this has implications for practice (Haug 2018; Backe-Hansen et al. 2016; Munro 2011; Aamodt 2017). The article by Robert Myrvang and Veronica Haug Bekkstrand, for example, problematizes how the demand for evidence and risk discourses becomes a form of control that the state can use against families (Myrvang and Bekkstrand 2023). A study from England also shows how child welfare services are governed by a risk mindset that individualizes structural conditions. The risk approach means that child welfare services focus on what the families are unable to cope with rather than the life conditions the families live in. As a result, responsibility and guilt are imposed on individuals for conditions that may actually have societal causes. The study shows how structural conditions are neither seen nor recognized because child welfare services focus on individual risk factors (Featherstone et al. 2018). As early as 2011, the English child welfare researcher Eileen Munro wrote about how child welfare services are governed by a risk mindset that is intended to protect against wrong decisions. Decisions emerge as a form of risk management in which assessment templates and standardizations are intended to ensure professional practice (Munro 1996, 2008, 2011). In this article, we supplement these studies on child welfare services' risk thinking. We show how risk thinking cannot be seen in isolation from a political and moral discourse that deems child welfare parents to have an identity and position as being "dangerous".

2. Society's Management of Risk

In the classic “The Policing of Families”, Jacques Donzelot (1979) problematizes how social work intervenes in the private sphere of families as an extended arm of the state. He shows how being poor was considered a *risk*, which gave the state a reason to intervene. For example, poor people were subjected to mass sterilization or removal of their children. Risk thinking is also evident in the sentencing of minors. Here, he shows how the court bases its sentencing more on who the minors *are* than what they have done. Because the minors are considered to be at risk of unequal development, the punishment was rooted in the age of the adolescents rather than the specific offence (Beddoe 2018). It is a politicization of the family that Donzelot explains with a goal of continued capitalist accumulation (Donzelot 1979). In the same way, one can see how the mentally ill can be locked up if they are assumed to pose a risk to society. However, locking them up is not based on what they have done but based on a risk of what they can do (Dean 2010).

Michel Foucault (2000) also points to the control of the state when he shows how a criminal must confess his sins in order to receive a just sentence. A criminal who does not share his thoughts will be constructed as dangerous and judged accordingly. “A fair justice system is only for those who are willing to show themselves by entrusting the state with their secrets”, he writes. Both Donzelot and Foucault show how social work practice can be understood as deeply political. Social work emerges as the state's risk management, where the overriding consideration is protection, whether it is of the society or the individual. The risk perspective can thus be seen as the nourishment of power. It is the expectation of risk that creates the scope for power.

A number of researchers have shown how today's Western society is governed by a risk-taking mindset that transforms people into at-risk individuals (Beck 1992; Douglas 1986, 1994; Ericson et al. 2000; Lupton 2023). A key point is how morality and politics have a decisive impact on what and who is considered to be at risk, and furthermore how it will be the experts' perceptions of risk that form the basis for political measures and that make some people appear to be at risk (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2014). Among other things, Mary Douglas shows how risk cannot be understood isolated from what is considered dangerous and how this is conditioned by politics and morality as cultural phenomena (Douglas 1994).

Risk thinking transforms the mandate of social workers. It is about a calculation of what could possibly happen (Rose 1998; Hacking 1991). Risk brings the future to the present for management. In this way, the role of a social worker is no longer that of a helper, but a controller. The role requires social workers to minimize the risk of risky situations or risky individuals. It is a way of disciplining what we do not know (Rose 1998). Castel describes how risk management has become an integral part of the professionals' responsibilities, where the management of risk takes the form of a transformation of the professionals' subjectivity. It is the individual professional who must assess the risk under a specific form of responsibility. If something unfortunate occurs, the responsibility emerges as the individual's fault (Castel 1991 in Dean 2010).

3. Methodology

3.1. The Empirical Material

The data material is audio recordings of internal discussions where the employees discuss the framework for and the extent of contact between parents and children in public care. Invitations were sent to 25 child welfare services. We sent invitations to the whole country, as we wanted to include different regions and child welfare services from both urban and rural areas. There are five child welfare services participating in the study. These are located in both cities and districts in Norway. The employees were given a Dictaphone

that was put on record when assessments about contact were to be made. The Dictaphone with recordings was then retrieved by the researchers. The recordings were made in 2020 and 2021. A total of 45 discussions were recorded, lasting between 20 and 120 min. Between four and seven people participated in the discussions, and the family's contact person presented the case; other participants were usually colleagues at the same level, as well as a group manager.

A possible limitation of the data is that the informants speak differently because they know they are being recorded.

3.2. Analysis Strategy

Two researchers listened to the recordings several times separately, made notes and discussed with each other. The recordings were then transcribed. The employees' communication is our object of analysis, and we have analyzed the communication as it appears on the recordings. We have not attempted to interpret whether the statements may be related to the employee's role in the child welfare service, educational background, gender or anything else that emerges from the recordings. We also did not consider whether the employees' statements are reasonable or attempted to interpret what could be possible intentions or reasons behind the statements.

The analysis is rooted in a constructivist view of science and is a second-order analysis (Luhmann 1995; Moeller 2006; Aamodt 2019). In the analysis, we have observed the employees' observations of contact, where we have asked the following questions about the material:

From what position is contact assessed?

Are there any specific assumptions about contact from this position?

When the employees are to decide on contact, they will communicate various considerations to be able to assess the extent and content of contact between children and parents. In the analysis, we looked for the considerations the employees communicate. The considerations were then sorted into two different categories, both of which produce contact as a risk. One is the consideration of the total burden of contact visits, and the other is that contact should be kept at a minimum. The last category we have analyzed considers it a risk *not to* have access. This category has been included because here contact stands out as particularly different from the other discussions. This category is thus an exception that has a particular impact on how contact is discussed. The categories have been developed and constructed as a result of how different considerations in the assessment of contact appear as a risk. Thus, theory and empirical data have a constitutive effect on each other (Pors and Husted 2020).

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Sikt (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research) has recommended the project with report number 748652. The head of department at the child welfare services requested the employees in advance of the meetings whether they consented to making recordings during the meeting. Written consent was obtained with an information form. The audio file was then encrypted and transferred to a memory stick. The recordings on the Dictaphone were then deleted. Neither the child welfare service nor contact people are connected to the audio files. Therefore, it is not possible to link the audio files to a specific child welfare service or to a specific child or family. We were prepared to carry out further anonymization during transcription if information were to emerge that could identify children or families. However, there was no need for this, as the content of the recordings is anonymous. The child welfare services were informed that participation

was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the project at any time and that they were guaranteed full anonymity.

4. Contact Is Seen as a Risk

As previously mentioned, the analysis is based on two overarching questions for the data material. We have explored the position from which contact is communicated, and then we have asked questions about the assumptions associated with this position. As described, the data material consists of 45 discussions in which four to seven people participated. It is thus a very comprehensive material, with many different voices and perspectives. Nonetheless, in many of the discussions, contact emerges as a risk. Among other things, it is considered safer to suggest a minimum amount of contact for the child. The way the employees describe it, this is because, if contact is to be increased, child welfare services can decide this themselves. If access is to be reduced, child welfare services cannot do so without it being subject to a court hearing. There is therefore a risk associated with the child welfare services recommending access that they later wish to reduce. The risk is also reflected in the fact that contact is considered to be a burden, and therefore it is important to minimize this burden. There are also discussions where it is assumed to be a risk for the child not to have contact with his or her parents, and thus that contact is considered significant in itself. However, these are exceptions. The results are presented below through these three categorizations: a minimum of contact, a consideration of the total burden, and contact as significant. Under each category, an example is presented in the form of a short excerpt from the material. The example given is an excerpt from a long discussion, so it does not serve the purpose of showing what the discussion is like but how the category we have constructed can emerge in the discussions.

4.1. Minimum Contact

In the case below, contact for a 2-year-old girl is discussed. She has been in an emergency foster home for 1 year and has had visitation with her mother once a month for two hours. The reason why she had to move away from her mother is described by the staff as her mother's lack of parenting skills. The girl has special needs. The mother has retained custody of a younger child. In the following dialogue, the employees discuss whether the contact should be changed:

- A: (...) What we proposed in our case proposal was to have visitation once a month for two hours. The way I see it, I think it's doable, but it depends very much on where the girl is placed.
- B: There is a bit of a question about whether there should be as many as twelve visits a year, or can you say that it is better for the girl if there are eight visits a year, or ten for that matter? One can rather look at an escalation as we see how it goes? It might be better to see the mother eight or ten times and rather maybe have three hours each time, for example? Or will it be too much for the mother? Is it the case that three hours is too much?
- A: There are two other aspects. One is that if the child is to have good development, it is not necessarily the case that she should not ... I don't think she's hurt so much by seeing her mother once a month
- C: (...) These are the new guidelines that the ECHR has laid down, so I think that twelve visits a year satisfy some of the new requirements. And then there is this, we are not aware of any type of serious violence, or abuse. It's about a bit of a lack of care competence. So I'm leaning a little towards twelve times a year for two and a half hours, for example, rather than eight.

- D: I'll just say one thing about frequency. I just think that the advantage is if you do ten visits a year, which is not so much less than twelve year, as this is about every six weeks instead . . . We are not unfamiliar with increasing visitation if we see that it is right. But instead of planning a lot of visitation, and then you see that it doesn't work, and then you have to go to the Child Welfare Tribunal to reduce it again, right? Which is a much more difficult process. So it's kind of . . . Okay, now I'm talking a bit also in relation to the practicalities of it. But what I want to say is that we are not unfamiliar with doing extra visitation if we see that it is good for the children. I also think that if you have ten visits a year, it is quite frequent. Two hours, it goes very fast. In that sense, a three-hour sequence will be able to give a better quality, that you can do things, that is, you can be allowed to maybe do something in the time together. This is what I think.
- A: (. . .) But at the same time, we see that mother has, I also see that they have good contact with each other, and want them to know a lot about each other, and that she should be a part of her life, and they should be a part of each other's lives, even if they can't live together. So it's very difficult.

This discussion is an example of how employees often express that they will recommend a minimum amount of visitation and rather increase visitation after assessing how the visitation works. Thus, contact is seen as a risk. What is risky is not so clear. For example, it may be about what is expressed in this discussion, that the child may be placed far away from the parents, thus implying a long journey. Thus, there is a risk that contact becomes a burden in the child's everyday life. They also discuss how long the visit should be in order for it to be good, e.g., the example of whether the visitation should be two or three hours, and if there is a the risk that the visitation quality can deteriorate if it lasts too long. Several discussions refer to the judgments of the European Court of Human Rights, which state that access is a right for children and parents and that they must therefore facilitate some contact, preferably more frequently than has previously been the norm. However, there is a pervasive discourse that contact should be as little as possible; meanwhile, at the same time, it is said that the child welfare service is free to increase contact if appropriate and that contact should be evaluated. In the example above, we see that the employees express that this case is not about violence or abuse but a lack of care competence. There is also an employee who expresses that the mother and child have good contact with each other. She therefore thinks that the mother should be a part of her daughter's life even if they cannot live together. Nevertheless, it seems that visitation can be a maximum of three hours a month.

4.2. Total Burden

In the case below, contact for a pair of siblings aged 7 and 8 is discussed. There is a boy and a girl, the father is Norwegian, and the mother is from an Asian country. The mother has stayed in her home country for the past month:

- E: You and I had a conversation with the father to find out what he thought about visitation.
- F: Yes. What emerges is that he would like to have contact at least once a month. But he understands that it may not be that much, at least not in the beginning, and he's very familiar with our thoughts and our assessments.
- G: I perceive him as having little understanding of child protection. And I had to explain the difference between Act relating to Children and Parents and Act relating to Child Welfare. Because at one point it sounded like he almost wanted the children every weekend. At the same time, he says that he's very open for everything we do and say, and I mean, he bends to that, and he really wants to cooperate with us. And he wants the best for his kids. And then it emerges that he can't cope with having the children

together for a visit. What's been going on for some time now is that the boy has been in an emergency foster home since, is it New Year?

- E: Yes, the boy is in an emergency foster home, and it's quite far away, so there hasn't been much contact with the boy. Whereas the girl, who has spent her weekdays in respite care home and during her weekends with the father, they have been at home all weekend. Then we realized that the father tried to have both of them at the same time at Easter, I think. It didn't go well, he can't handle it. The kids end up at each other's throats in a way that he can't handle. So he had to call and ask them to pick up the boy again, wasn't that right, Martin?
- H: To pick up the girl.
- E: Pick up the girl, yes. So, when we talk to the father about how he envisions visitation, he does not imagine that he can have both at the same time for a long time. In the long run, he wants that. And then he imagines that he will have them, when he has them, he will have them for quite a long time. Then he really wants to have them from Friday to Sunday, as I hear what he says (. . .).
- F: (. . .) What I wanted to say, was that when we are going to have an opinion about visitation with the father, we have to look at it as a whole package. How much contact should these children have together? How often do they have to leave their foster home? And I think it's really hard to know. Is it possible to suggest a type of contact if the mother moves back to Norway? Alternatively, a different type of contact if she stays in her home country? Because right now there is a corona crisis, or infection control measures and difficulties. If she stays in her home country, what kind of opportunities do we have to get in touch with her and get her to come here for visitation?
- E: It sounds like a good idea to have two different solutions. If the mother moves back and if she stays in her home country.
- G: It can also be a bit predictable for the foster home to know what they may have to deal with both options. And then we must take into account here that because of the sibling relationship, we also want the foster homes to have a close collaboration in helping the children and working on their relationship. So, there will be a lot of interaction between the children and the foster homes, if we manage to get them to be close to each other.
- Q: Yes, so the total load is important that we think about here

In many discussions, contact is considered a burden, and, thus, the extent of contact constitutes a risk of a total burden. This includes the fact that the child may be stressed if they are to have contact with siblings, the mother and the father and where this cannot be done at the same time. The visitation must therefore be divided between the parents and siblings who are in other foster homes so that it does not become too great a burden for the child. The risk associated with the total amount of contact is also rooted in a family situation that is as normal as possible. If the child has frequent contact in different places, with different people, it can cause unrest and threaten a calm, normal family situation. Thus, contact is also communicated as a risk that threatens the "normal".

The total burden is also expressed as a consideration for the foster parents. Here, contact is seen as a risk to the stability of the foster home. Because the children can have reactions before and after the visits, it threatens the foster home's endurance of the assignment. Thus, the total burden is also assessed from a foster parent's perspective, where the child welfare service is afraid that the burden will be too great on the foster home and risk them withdrawing from the foster home assignment. Thus, access appears as a burden where there is a risk that the total amount of contact may threaten the consideration of what is best for the child in his or her new care situation.

4.3. Exception: Risk of Not Having Access

In the case below, contact is discussed for a nine-year-old girl. Her mother died recently, and the girl has had no contact with her father. The father has not been interested in having contact with his daughter:

- C: (...) It is also part of the story to state that the father himself has been under the care of the child welfare service and lived in an institution before he turned 18. Isn't that true?
- D: (...) Yes. But we must simply find out what kind of visitation capacity the father has, and then find out what kind of visitation willingness he has. Do we have any ... What does he himself say about that?
- C: I've talked to the father today. He says that he wants visitation 1–2 times a month. But he understands that he must get to know the girl again. Then I have talked to the girl today to get her version, what she thinks ... She does not want contact with her father.
- E: Not at all?
- C: No. I ask if she wants to be with her father if someone she knows can be with her. Nor does she. And then I ask if there is anything special she thinks about that makes her not want to have contact with her father. Then she says that she doesn't know him. We talked a little about how it is possible to get to know each other. But then I don't get a proper answer. Basically, she says she doesn't want to. Then I read to her what I had written. Where it says that she does not want contact. And then she confirms that it was absolutely right.
- E: But as far as I understand, we know that the mother did not want the girl to have contact while she was alive. Could it have any impact on ...?
- C: We must believe so. That it has some impact.
- D: But what you said earlier about visitation skills. What can we know about that? Do we have any kind of knowledge about the father?
- C: I have asked the father for consent to collect information on him today. And I received consent to collect from the police, doctor and NAV (The Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration). I think that it will say something about the practical things. If there are things we should know about. But in relation to whether he has the ability as a caregiver, these institutions can't say much about this.
- E: But the father has no other children?
- C: No.
- D: He has a job and lives with a partner. Is that how it is? And then we should listen to what the girl says, but to recommend no visitation is a bit drastic I think when she doesn't know him. Her need to get to know ...
- C: I think it's natural to give her the opportunity to get to know him.
- E: We who work in the Care Team have seen that when children start to become teenagers, we see that they become more curious about their biological family, maybe this has something to do with the fact that they get more concerned with who I am and why I am like that, why do I have such a nose, Who do I look like? We experience that the need for and the opportunity to have a little more contact when you start to become a teenager, and in some cases that is good. Now this girl is not that big, she will be nine years old this fall. If we think about the fact that she says that she doesn't know him at all, there should be opportunities for her to be able to meet him.

This excerpt is an example of an exception in the data material. Although most of the discussions construct contact as a risk, there are several discussions where contact, as in this case, is seen as significant and important for the child's development. In these cases, contact is communicated as an opportunity and as something the employees are responsible for facilitating. Even though this girl does not want to spend time with her father, the employees emphasize establishing a relationship. Rather than seeing visitation

as a risk, it is spoken of as important for the girl's development. The employees describe that the father also has been in public care and that they are unsure of how he will interact with the girl. Nevertheless, their starting point is that contact must be established. The fact that the girl does not want contact does not change the attitude of the employees. Rather, they try to understand the girl's statements and what makes her not want to see her father. The employees also refer to their own knowledge and experience in relation to the fact that many children will ask for their own history as part of their identity development when they become adolescents.

4.4. Summary of Results

It appears from the analysis that the child welfare service's employees may find it safer to propose a minimum amount of contact. In many cases, this means a visitation around every 6 weeks, or 8 to 12 times a year. The employees express that they can increase the contact frequency, but that it is correspondingly difficult to reduce if they have recommended too frequent contact. Therefore, it is considered safer to propose a minimum amount of contact that they may be able to increase. The employees also consider that the total amount of contact may be a risk to the child. They express that the overall contact may be too high a burden for the child and that contact with one parent cannot be perceived independently of the child's contact with the other parent or others in the child's network. Thus, an important consideration is what they describe as *the total burden* of contact. There are also discussions where it is considered a risk for the child not to have contact or not to have sufficient contact with their parents. Here, the perspective is that the relationship with the parents is important to the child *by definition*. If there is no relationship between children and parents, the employees are concerned with facilitating the (re)establishment of this relationship. However, visitation discussions from this perspective constitute an exception.

5. Discussion

In many ways, this study confirms what previous research has pointed out as the Child Welfare Service's risk culture (Haug 2018; Backe-Hansen et al. 2016; Munro 2011; Aamodt 2017). In many discussions, contact is seen as a risk. However, it is not clear *what* this risk consists of, but rather it is a position where contact is generally considered a risk for the child. Having contact with parents is considered more unsafe than children not seeing their parents. In other words, it is safer to opt for limited access. In this way, the legal basis for contact appears as an administrative measure that must be implemented, rather than safeguarding the *content* of the contact provision. Namely, it may be important for the child to maintain a relationship with their parents. The question is what it is that produces this position. What is it that makes contact a risk in the first place?

When we do not know our future, there can still be no such thing as a truly existing risk. Thus, defining something as a risk is a way of constructing reality. Considering contact as a risk is a framework of understanding or a category of understanding (Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2014). Therefore, what is considered risky cannot be viewed isolated from what risk is associated with (Dean 2010). The most important thing about risk is not risk itself but the knowledge that produces it. It is a way of portraying reality that makes it available for action and intervention. When contact is produced as a risk, it also provides access to see contact as something that must be limited and minimized. Thus, it also becomes a position that produces restrictions. By seeing contact as a risk, the Child Welfare Service is given a tool to control (Dean 2010; Featherstone et al. 2018; Foucault 2000).

Thus, the child welfare authorities' assessments of visitation will simultaneously reflect institutional and political discourses (Donzelot 1979; Pestaña 2012). In line with Donzelot (1979), it is conceivable that child welfare services' practices reflect a social discourse in

which parents are considered “dangerous”. When contact between children and parents is considered a risk, parents are constituted as actually or potentially harmful individuals. This creates a basis for managing and acting in a way that minimizes risk, and limits contact between parents and children. As a result, it may feel safer for child welfare services to recommend limited contact between parents and children. The results are in line with previous research showing that child welfare services in Norway have often recommended restrictive contact of 4–6 times a year, or what may now have become a new norm of contact 12 times a year (Alvik 2021; Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2022).

The risk logic that emerges in the child welfare service’s practice becomes a knowledge base where certain considerations must be assessed within a risk account. Assessing the total burden of contact presupposes that contact is seen as a burden in itself. One could have thought differently: that it would be important to assess the burden of a lack of or infrequent contact between children and parents. With reference to Douglas, we can therefore ask what dominant mindset makes it riskier for children to have contact with their parents than not to have contact. What kind of societal morals and cultural policies designate child welfare parents as dangerous individuals (Douglas 1994; Mik-Meyer and Villadsen 2014)?

Previous studies show how *the child* has been given a special position in the conception of the Norwegian welfare state. The child is placed at the center in a way that justifies the legitimacy of the state’s intervention in family life. Through practices such as early intervention, prevention and parental duties, children are to be raised as productive citizens (Hennum and Aamodt 2020). However, if things go wrong and the child has problems, only the parents are to blame (Jensen 2018). This creates a parenthood with infinite responsibility. The state becomes an authoritarian power that governs and shapes what parenthood is and should be. Thus, the relationship between the state and the family in the neoliberal society does not appear as liberal but, paradoxically, as *more* regulated (Hennum and Aamodt 2024).

In a culture where risky actions, by definition, constitute a threat (Garland 2003), contact becomes something that must be limited and controlled, but not because you can say in advance what is at risk. Rather, it is a consequence of a moral discourse in which the child should be protected. In a society where *the child* is the very symbol of the functioning of the welfare state, there is no greater sin than not fulfilling one’s parental responsibility. This creates an easy path for the discourse about the dangerous parent. In this way, the state can also exercise its power.

This study shows how difficult it can be to act and think across the expectations of the discourse. Many of the discussions in our material communicate contact as a risk. However, there are exceptions. Some discussions describe contact with parents as important and significant. Where the discourse on dangerous parents facilitates restrictive and general contact practices, a different view of parents could create a different practice. Knowing that the most frequent child protection measure after an investigation is rooted in a lack of parenting skills, and in particular a lack of emotional care (Statistics Norway (Statistisk Sentralbyrå (SSB)) 2023), there is reason to ask what it is about contact that poses a risk. Is it emotional care that the child needs during contact, or is it conceivable that contact may also have another function? Moreover, the content of the concept will depend on the theoretical knowledge base (Aamodt and Olkowska 2024). Therefore, it is not given how emotional care is expressed. In addition, it is difficult to understand how restrictions on contact can be based on a lack of emotional care alone, especially because parents can be offered guidance and help to facilitate the best possible contact (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2022).

We have previously described how crucial it can be for the child welfare service to distinguish between parents’ care and visitation competence (Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2024). The fact that parents cannot have the daily care of the child does not mean that

they cannot be good non-custodial parents, or that contact and visitation are not important for the child. There is also reason to ask what the discourse about the “dangerous child welfare parent” does to parents’ view of themselves. Previous studies show how parents in the child welfare service can feel excluded and marginalized in several areas of society. Among other things, they experience being exposed in the media with identities they do not recognize (Aamodt and Olkowska 2023). The question is whether the discourse on the “dangerous child welfare parent” not only contributes to a restrictive contact practice in the child welfare services but that it can also contribute to poorer contact between parents and children. For parents who are already defined as not good enough, it can be particularly difficult to see themselves as important and significant in their child’s life. Thus, the logic of contact as a risk can become self-fulfilling. According to this perspective, seeing contact as a risk itself becomes a risk.

6. Concluding Reflections

The child welfare service must make individual assessments when recommending contact between parents and children under public care (Stang et al. 2023). An individual assessment will necessarily require that the parents are seen individually. In Denmark, contact between parents and children after a care order is something the social services and the parents agree on. It is only when no agreement is reached that the matter is brought to the Children and Young People’s Committee (Stang et al. 2023; Aamodt and Sommerfeldt 2024). Simultaneously, this practice produces professional room for maneuvering. It is only when encountering the parents’ knowledge that the child welfare employees can gain insight into the individual considerations required by the child’s situation and thus be given the opportunity to exercise their professional judgement.

We have tried to show how the child welfare service’s visitation practices in Norway can be seen as the result of a political discourse. In addition to the fact that contact appears to be significant and important for the child’s development, contact appears as an administrative entity where the discourse about the “dangerous child welfare parent” makes contact something risky. In this way, parents in the child welfare service are given an identity that has already been defined. More than being an identity that is explored, it emerges as general.

In this article, we have tried to show how political discourses are an exercise of power and control that dispose social work practice. However, it is a management that presupposes the individual child welfare service’s self-management (Foucault 1982; Aamodt 2015). Despite the clear expectations of the discourse, it is possible to think and act differently. However, this requires an eye for the power structures of which we are all both a part of and a continuator of. We hope that this article can contribute to this awareness.

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