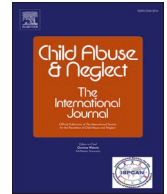




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## 'It's not like we use the word emotional abuse'. A study on Norwegian child welfare workers understanding of emotional abuse

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Despite the recognition of emotional abuse (EA) as the most pervasive and harmful of all forms of child maltreatment, it is argued to be less understood than other forms of child maltreatment. EA is regarded as a standalone form for maltreatment and an essential factor embedded in all other forms of maltreatment of children, such as physical and sexual abuse. Thus, it is crucial for child welfare workers to understand EA, as one of their core mandates is to prevent and protect children from all forms of maltreatment.

**Objective:** This study aims to explore how child welfare workers in Norway describe and understand EA.

**Participants and setting:** The study included 24 child welfare workers in 6 child welfare offices in Norway.

**Methods:** The data were obtained from focus group interviews and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis.

**Results:** Overall, the findings reveal that EA was unfamiliar to the child welfare workers, and that there is a low degree of awareness on EA among the study participants. Further, EA is closely connected to whether parents provide sufficient emotional care for their children and is understood as part of the complex situation surrounding the child.

**Conclusions:** This article concludes with the need for reflective and sensitive discussions regarding understanding and awareness of EA in child welfare work. This has the potential to lead to greater insights into how EA is understood by child welfare workers as well as to enhance child welfare workers' abilities to describe, communicate about, and document EA.

## 1. Introduction

Child welfare workers' understanding of child abuse and maltreatment have implications for the response and assistance provided by child welfare services (CWS) (Aadnanes, 2020; Aakvaag, Thoresen, & Øverlien, 2016). Accordingly, a recent literature review on how Norwegian CWS work with children who experience maltreatment demonstrates a need to focus on how child welfare workers understand and intervene in different forms of maltreatment (Kojan et al., 2020). Child abuse and maltreatment are commonly classified into sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, neglect, and children experiencing domestic abuse and violence (e.g., Butchart, Harvey, Mian, et al., 2006; Meinck et al., 2016; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Alink, 2015). Emotional and psychological abuse, as well as neglect, are argued to have been given the least attention in research, policy, and child

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welfare work (e.g., Brassard, Hart, & Glaser, 2020; Kloppen, Mæhle, Kvello, & Breivik, 2015). Moreover, emotional and psychological abuse, and neglect are argued to be less understood than other forms of child maltreatment (Aadnanes, 2020; Munro, 2020).

Despite sparse attention and challenges inherent in understanding emotional abuse (EA) and neglect, these forms of child abuse and maltreatment is recognized as the most pervasive and harmful of all forms of child maltreatment (Brassard et al., 2020; Stoltenborgh et al., 2015). This is also supported by research that includes children's experiences with maltreatment. In these studies, the participants consider EA and neglect the most hurtful of their experiences of maltreatment (Aadnanes & Gulbrandsen, 2018; Øverlien, 2012). Numerous studies further demonstrate that experiences with EA and neglect are likely to have long-lasting and wide-ranging impacts on the well-being, health, and emotional and behavioral development of children and youth (e.g., Brassard, 2019; Felitti et al., 2019; Spinazzola et al., 2014). Due to these severe consequences, it is crucial for child welfare workers to understand this form of maltreatment, as one of their core mandates is to prevent and protect children from all forms of maltreatment (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). To the best of my knowledge, no prior studies have explored how Norwegian child welfare workers understand EA of children. This study, thus, directs its attention to how child welfare workers understand EA by illuminating the following research question: *How is emotional abuse of children described and understood by child welfare workers?*

### 1.1. Conceptualizing emotional abuse

The aim of this study is to explore the diversity in how Norwegian child welfare workers describe and understand EA, as it is variations in how EA is referred to, defined, operationalized, and interpreted between and within countries, cultures, and professions (Kloppen et al., 2015; author blinded for review, 2023; North, 2022; Ottosen, Frederiksen, & Henze-Pederesen, 2020). In the following I clarify how EA is conceptualized in this study.

In the literature on EA, the terms *emotional* and *psychological* are used in a varied manner. Certain researchers argue that there is no sufficient justification to distinguish between these terms (English, Thompson, White, & Wilson, 2015; Glaser, 2011). However, other researchers prefer *psychological* to *emotional*, as they argue that the word *psychological* is more comprehensive and incorporates the cognitive, affective, volitional, and interpersonal aspects of perpetration and outcomes of this form of child maltreatment (Hart, Brassard, Baker, & Chiel, 2018). For the purposes of this research, the term *emotional* is used, with the aim of creating a conceptual coherence between EA and emotional neglect. These concepts are both included in the broader term 'emotional (or psychological) maltreatment' (Hart et al., 2018). Further, this study utilizes the term *abuse*, even though the term *violence* is preferred in the Norwegian context. In this study, *abuse* is used to encourage a wider perspective and with the purpose of avoiding an excessive focus on the physical aspects of violence (Macy, Bradbury-Jones, Øverlien, Holt, & Devnaey, 2021).

*Abuse* is understood to be a part of the broader term *maltreatment* which includes both acts of commission (abuse) and omission (neglect) (Hart et al., 2018). EA is in this understanding conceptualized as actively harmful behavior (commission), while emotional neglect is described as the absence of emotional warmth (omission) (Hart et al., 2018). The actively harmful behaviors that comprise EA are the specific focus in this study. Nevertheless, the similar characteristics of EA and emotional neglect makes it challenging to distinguish children's experiences with these two concepts, both in the literature and in child welfare work (Hart et al., 2018; Ottosen et al., 2020; Trickett, Mennen, Kim, & Sang, 2009).

This study leans upon the definition and operationalization of emotional maltreatment given by Hart et al. (2018), p. 147):

“a repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior that thwart the child's basic psychological needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey a child is worthless, defective, damaged goods, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another's needs, and/or expandable”.

This understanding classifies emotional maltreatment into the following six areas: 1) spurning; 2) terrorizing; 3) exploiting/corrupting; 4) emotional unresponsiveness; 5) isolating; and 6) mental health, medical and educational neglect. Areas 1, 2, 3, and 5 address EA, while the other two areas (4 and 6) address emotional neglect (Ottosen et al., 2020). In this operationalization, children who experience domestic abuse and violence are considered EA and are included in terrorizing (Hart et al., 2018). Like this conceptualization of emotional maltreatment, the Norwegian government also refers to EA and emotional neglect as two separate categories. The Norwegian government, however, often refers to the conceptualization of child abuse and violence given by the World Health Organization (2002) which divides child maltreatment into the following five forms: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, neglect, and children exposed to domestic abuse and violence (e.g., Kloppen et al., 2015; Meinck et al., 2016).

As outlined above, the national and international terminologies, operationalizations and definitions of EA are varying. Thus, the translations of terminology and adoptions of operationalizations and definitions are not unproblematic, as they do not always refer to the same phenomenon. I respect other conceptualizations and also recognize that the selected terminology, operationalization, and definition have limitations while aiming to include an easily recognizable conceptualization both in the national and international contexts. Despite this limitation, the aim of this study is to explore how child welfare workers describe and understand EA. Thus, it is necessary to employ a broad conceptualization and make space for the participants' descriptions, interpretations, and understanding of the phenomenon under study.

### 1.2. Challenges inherent in understanding emotional abuse

Even though there is limited research on Norwegian child welfare workers understanding of EA, there is extended literature on challenges inherent in understanding EA. Certain studies also demonstrates how these challenges have implications for child welfare work. In the following, these challenges, and implications will be illuminated.

As mentioned, one challenge in understanding EA is the varying terminology, operationalization, and definitions. This is elaborated

on in a recent literature review, which proposes that these variations may affect child welfare workers' awareness of EA as well as how they engage and intervene with EA (Ness, 2023). Despite varying conceptualizations of EA, it is primarily understood as repetitive actions included in a pattern of deficient parenting that conveys to children that they are worthless, unloved, and unwanted (Ness, 2023). Thus, EA is evident in the quality of the relationship between a primary caregiver and a child in terms of being constituted by discrete and reoccurring incidents. This makes the nature of EA invisible and intangible, and studies have argued that this challenges child welfare workers' understanding of EA as well as naming, addressing, and attributing EA clearly to parents (Iwaniec, Larkin, & McSherry, 2007; North, 2022).

Another challenge in understanding EA is how it is not recognized only as a standalone form of maltreatment, but also as an essential underlying component of other forms of maltreatment, either in parental action or in outcomes for the affected children (Brassard, Hart, Baker, & Chiel, 2017; Hart et al., 2011). Thus, the described nature of EA is challenging to observe both in isolation and alongside other forms of abuse, as EA is perceived as less concrete and less observable than, for example, physical abuse. Studies have shown that this will likely cause challenges for child welfare workers in recognizing, identifying, investigating, and evidence on EA (Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins, 2006; Iwaniec et al., 2007; North, 2022).

A third challenge of understanding EA are the differences in accepted parenting practices and norms for child rearing in different societies and contexts (Baker, Brassard, & Rosenzweig, 2021; Iwaniec et al., 2007; Munro, 2020; North, 2022). EA is mainly described in parental behaviors, which is challenging, as the behaviors and interactions that are indicative of EA also occur in normal family life and are not necessarily harmful to children (Baker et al., 2021; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011). Studies have demonstrated that the varying thresholds for when parental behaviors are considered harmful for children is challenging for child welfare workers in their efforts in assessing the boundaries between inadequate parenting practices and emotionally abusive behavior posing harm to children (Munro, 2020; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011).

### 1.3. Professional discretion in child welfare work with EA

The Norwegian policy and legislation emphasize children's right to a life free from all forms of abuse and violence (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). This represents a zero-tolerance ideal against abuse and violence. However, such an ideal requires a clear definition of what abuse is, and what children should be prevented and protected from. This is challenging when it comes to EA, since a professional consensus has not been reached regarding what constitutes emotionally abusive and neglectful behaviors (Munro, 2020; Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011).

Even though EA is described in length in Norwegian legislation and policy, it is broadly formulated, and there is low clarity regarding where the thresholds for intervention should be. Child welfare workers, thus, work in what is described as the 'swampy lowlands of practice', where it is challenging to find simple solutions, or descriptions, to complex situations (Schön, 1983). Because of this practice landscape, conditions of uncertainty, and the complex challenges inherent in understanding and describing EA, child welfare work with EA requires a high degree of professional discretion (Molander, 2016).

Professional discretion is characterized by applying knowledge to connect and classify a concrete situation to a professional understanding of the problem (Abbott, 1988). Child welfare workers, thus, must negotiate their understanding of EA by utilizing different structures in child welfare work, such as child welfare legislation, as well as the mandate, intentions, and governmental guidelines for Norwegian CWS. They also base their understandings of EA on their personal and professional experiences and knowledge, the prevailing knowledge base, and the established ideals for parenting practices and childrearing. These mentioned structures, experiences, ideals and knowledge, thus, shape the professional discretion of child welfare workers. Therefore, I will in the following account, provide a brief overview of relevant child welfare work approaches, the prevailing knowledge base and ideals for parenting practices in the Norwegian CWS.

The overall aim of the Norwegian CWS is to ensure the provision of appropriate help and care, at the right time, for children and young people who live in circumstances that are potentially harmful to their health and development (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). Thus, the mandate of the Norwegian CWS is twofold: a welfare mandate in terms of supporting children and families to prevent abuse and neglect, and a protection mandate that involves taking coercive and compulsory action to protect children from maltreatment (Falch-Eriksen & Skivenes, 2019).

The Norwegian CWS is typically described as service- and family- oriented, because of its prioritization of voluntary and preventive measures in the home, and its low threshold for implementing measures (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011; Pösö, Skivenes, & og Hestbæk, 2014; Skivenes & Søvig, 2017). However, recent research has also demonstrated that the Norwegian CWS is risk-oriented, with a specific focus on the deficits of parents and children (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Ellingsen, Studsrød, & og Ursin, 2019; Feyling & Øfsti, 2023). The risk-oriented approach is closely linked to the protection mandate of child welfare, as it aims to prevent and reduce a potential risk that children may be exposed to. However, this approach is criticized and problematized because it leads the CWS to be more concerned with clarifying the risk for abuse rather than the families need for support (Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021; Backe-Hansen, Smette, & Vislie, 2017; Christiansen et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the government's plan for combating abuse and violence includes a risk-oriented approach. This is, thus, in line with the authorities' expectations of the CWS efforts to combat abuse and violence (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, 2014-2017).

Further, the Norwegian CWS is described as child-centric in terms of aiming to protect children from abuse and maltreatment as well as facilitating what we, as a society, understand as a good childhood and the best possible growing up and development conditions for children (Hennum, 2016; Pösö et al., 2014). In the Norwegian society, this implies a distinct focus on how parents bring up children in a developmentally supportive manner. The role of emotions and the children's feelings of safety is highly emphasized (Fævelen, Fauske, Kojan, & Kaasbøll, 2023). When making decisions in the Norwegian CWS, the focus, thus, is on the relational and emotional

aspects in parent-child relationships as well as on ensuring that children are provided sufficient emotional care (Hennum, 2016; Skilbred and Havnen, 2017). Further, the problems children encounter is often justified based on how parents fail to provide sufficient emotional care for their children or how parents lack normative parenting competencies (Hennum, 2016). Accordingly, a central feature of the Norwegian CWS is to provide services that aims to improve parental competencies and ensuring sufficient emotional care for children (Christiansen & Hollekim, 2018; Krutzinna & Skivenes, 2020).

According to the child-centric values, all measures initiated by the Norwegian CWS should be founded in the idea of the “best interest of the child,” and children are perceived as individuals with their own interests and rights, thereby making their position in policy and legislation strong (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). For child welfare workers, it is a specific mandate to include children's perspectives both when it comes to talking to the child and considering its view of the situation in child welfare decisions and assessments (The Child Welfare Act, 2021). Despite this mandate, studies argue that child welfare workers find it challenging to involve children and their perspectives when making assessments, and that the perspectives of children are often not sufficiently heard before decisions are made (Ormstad et al., 2020).

As outlined, the described characteristics, approaches, prevailing knowledge base and ideals for parenting practices shape the professional discretion of child welfare workers. It is therefore argued that reflection, in terms of looking back on what enables and constrains understandings and actions, is crucial to create new insights, perspectives, recognitions and expanded understandings of complex concepts and situations in child welfare work (Nordstoga Nordstoga, 2019). Reflection is, thus, a necessary element of developing as a professional (Schön, 1983), and it has the potential to strengthen the professional discretion in child welfare work with EA.

This study of understandings of emotional abuse is related to the specific context of Norwegian child welfare services. Despite this, there are reasons to believe that the findings are relevant to other child welfare systems as knowledge regarding child welfare workers' descriptions and understanding of EA of children are applicable beyond the Norwegian child welfare context.

## 2. Method and analysis

This study is part of a Ph.D. project with the overall aim of exploring how EA is understood in child welfare work. The current article is a qualitative study based on 24 child welfare workers' descriptions and understandings of EA of children.

### 2.1. Sampling and recruitment

The child welfare workers who participated in this study were recruited based on their formal qualifications as child welfare workers or social workers. They were further required to have more than one year of working experience as caseworkers in child welfare work at the municipality level in Norway. The management of the six child welfare offices who participated in the overall Ph.D. project sent an e-mail with an initial request and with information about the study to the relevant child welfare workers. Potential participants were provided with additional information regarding the study, which included written and oral information about the study, data confidentiality, and their right to withdraw from the research project at any stage without explanation. Moreover, participation was based on a voluntary, informed consent, and the study was registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, #210395).

The 24 child welfare workers that participated in this study, worked in 6 different child welfare offices in different parts of Norway. The offices had varying sizes and organizational structure. Most of the participants were women, thereby reflecting the common gender imbalance in the Norwegian child welfare services. The age of the participants varied from 22 to 65 years, and their experience varied from 2 to over 30 years. All but two of the participants in the final sample were educated as child welfare or social workers. One of these two was educated as a preschool teacher, and one held a bachelor in psychology. Despite a different educational background than the other participants, both worked as a “contact person” or “caseworker” and both had extended relevant experience in the context of child welfare services at a municipality level.

### 2.2. Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were considered the most appropriate method for data collection as they are argued to be suitable when the purpose of the research is to elicit people's own understanding, opinions or views, or when the purpose is to explore how these are advanced, elaborated, and negotiated in a specific context (Wilkinson, 2015). To obtain rich and nuanced data about the stated research question, a topic-guide was developed based on previous research on EA and on the theoretical and contextual framework presented earlier in this article. The topics centered around the child welfare workers' descriptions of EA, their understanding of EA, and their experiences of working with EA in the different phases of child welfare work, such as investigation, communicating with parents and children and decision-making regarding thresholds and level of support.

To explore the research question and the mentioned topics, six focus group interviews were conducted by me. The size of the focus groups varied from three to seven participants. All participants received information regarding the purpose of the study beforehand, which allowed them to reflect upon the topics of discussions prior to the interview. Of the six interviews, three were conducted at the location of the specific child welfare offices, while three interviews were conducted through Microsoft Teams and Zoom due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The focus group interviews began with a presentation of the main topic for discussion, a presentation of the purpose of the study and of the researcher, and relevant ethical issues. In addition, these interviews were conducted with a few “ground rules” to ensure that only one participant speaks at a time, that different views should be respected, and that the

confidentiality of each participant is maintained. Moreover, in online interviews, the “raise hand” function was used in all three interviews.

The participants in the focus groups were recruited from the same child welfare office. In one of the focus groups, I was familiar with two of the participants from my earlier work background. The fact that the participants were colleagues, and that I was familiar to a few participants may have affected the conversations in terms of creating unwanted group dynamics, flow in the discussions, and the participants expressions of perceptions, understandings and diverging opinions (Malterud, 2012, 2017). Despite these mentioned factors, there were limited variations in duration, content, or depth between the interviews. All interviews centered around the topics relevant to the study, and the participants were in general active and engaged throughout the interviews. The focus group interviews covered the mentioned topics which were relevant for the study, and the discussions generated reflections and interactions among the participants in the focus group interviews. Each interview lasted for 75–90 min, and they were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### 2.3. Analyzing the data

The data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). In line with this approach, I first read and then reread the transcriptions, while taking initial analytical notes to familiarize myself with the data. Further, I systematically coded the transcriptions relevant to the research question guiding the analysis, which in this study was “*How is emotional abuse of children described and understood by child welfare workers?*” By reading, rereading, and coding the data, I aimed to identify similarities and differences within and across interviews to generate initial themes. These themes were reviewed against the transcriptions before they were named and defined. The analytical process was recursive, moving back and forth between the phases of analysis - reading the data, coding, and developing, reviewing, and naming themes.

I aimed at analyzing the data inductively. This is, however, not entirely possible as who I am, and how I interpret and understand the content of the focus group interviews, contribute to the construction of meaning. I am a Ph.D. Candidate in science of professions, with extended experience with supporting families in need of support from different welfare services. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, I have endeavored to be aware of how this background and experience has affected the analytical process. To reduce bias, and ensure quality in the study, I have throughout the research process written a research diary to reflect upon my role as a researcher and how this might have affected the research. I have also co-read parts of the data, and repeatedly discussed the data and the on-going analysis with the supervisors of the Ph.D. project. Thus, the internal validity of the findings and analysis was negotiated, reviewed, and discussed throughout the analytical process.

## 3. Findings

This section is organized according to the identified themes and connected to the stated research question. In the analytical process, the following themes were developed: 1) *It is not like we use the word “emotional abuse,”* 2) *Emotional abuse is related to emotional care,* 3) *Taking a child's perspective on emotional abuse,* and 4) *Emotional abuse is part of a complex situation.* The focus group interviews were not characterized by disagreements, but rather involved reflections mirroring the headings of the different themes. Accordingly, the findings of this study are both illustrated with longer quotations to ensure an in-depth description of the findings as well as with short excerpts to illuminate the breadth of the themes. These excerpts were translated from Norwegian to English when writing up the findings.

### 3.1. *It's not like we use the word “emotional abuse”*

The first theme focuses on how child welfare workers find EA to be a diffuse, intangible, and unfamiliar concept. It further illuminates delicate considerations of which terms and language to use to ensure collaboration for the best interest of the child, at the same time using a language that is clear and possible for parents to understand.

The results reveal that the focus group interviews mainly began with the child welfare workers emphasizing EA as a diffuse, unfamiliar, and intangible concept. The participants' descriptions focused on how they found EA challenging to “put into words” and how they lacked the words for describing what EA is: “It is diffuse, and many of us lack words to describe what it is and what happens.” As indicated by the following quote, EA is acknowledged as a phenomenon that they, as child welfare workers, encounter in their daily work: “We wade in it on a daily basis, but suddenly you need to think about and express what it really is.” In addition to recognizing EA of children as a frequent phenomenon in child welfare work, this quotation indicates that the child welfare workers find it difficult to articulate their knowledge regarding EA, and that it is challenging to give simple descriptions of such complex concepts in which child welfare workers deals with in their everyday work.

Overall, the participants in the focus groups argued that they have not engaged in conversations on EA as a topic before and are clear about not using the word EA in their work: “It is not like we use the word emotional abuse. We talk more about what it is.” This is elaborated by another participant stating, “It is more about explaining it, how it affects the child when you do this or that, and we elaborate more on the concrete examples.” These expressions shed light upon how child welfare workers are less concerned about labelling or defining parental behavior, or children's experiences, as EA. Rather, they are concerned with attempting to help parents understand how specific situations affect their child.

When reflecting upon the concept of EA, the child welfare workers tend to focus on parents' ability to provide emotional care for their children. Rather than labelling children's experiences that might be emotionally or psychologically harmful for children as EA,

they use terms like “emotional care.” However, across the focus group interviews, the participants discussed how terms like “emotional care” can be perceived as diffuse and unfamiliar as EA, and accordingly not easier for parents to understand or for professionals to explain and describe: “I see it when we conclude, you know, that we rather write ‘lack of emotional care’. But this is also a concept which is diffuse and hard to explain and conceptualize.”

In addition to preferring the use of more neutral terms, such as emotional care, because EA is an unfamiliar term for the parents, several child welfare workers also describe that they assume that parents might perceive the term “emotional abuse” as being scary: “using the word abuse, in general, is very scary, and a lot are not familiar with that, because they perceive abuse as hitting.” Related to this, the participants in two focus groups discussed how they need to negotiate and balance which words they use to reach an alliance and build positive relationships with the parents, thereby aiming to collaborate with them to help the child:

Whose language is it that we use? Ours or theirs? They who are receiving the help? We don't necessarily make it smaller by using other words, but maybe we make it more ‘eatable’ to reach an alliance which leads to children feeling better.

Through this expression, the child welfare worker reflects on the importance of awareness of how the language they choose potentially affects their collaboration with the family. Contrary to this, child welfare workers across the focus groups emphasize the need for them to be aware of terms such as EA, their responsibility to know how the terms they use differ, and to be aware of how EA is defined, understood, and how it affects children. Across the focus groups, a few child welfare workers argue that using the term EA may help parents to understand more clearly what child welfare workers are concerned about and it may also help them provide more concrete help to the families.

### 3.2. Emotional abuse is related to emotional care

As demonstrated in the first theme, the child welfare workers describe EA as diffuse, intangible, unfamiliar, and a word they rarely use. However, the second theme reveals that when given the opportunity to reflect upon EA, the participants provided varied and nuanced descriptions of the concept. Overall, the findings reveal that the child welfare workers described EA as an unsafe environment in the family and as patterns of parental behavior that are harmful for the child. The findings further illuminate how the child welfare workers described that EA is related to emotional care and how they perceive EA and emotional neglect as part of the holistic emotional care a child receives.

Across the focus groups, there are a few variations in terms of how EA is described. In two focus groups, the participants describe EA to be related to the relationships in the family, and that EA is about “creating a fear in the home.” These short excerpts indicate that EA affects the relationships in the family, and that experiences of EA create fear for the children. This is elaborated in the following example: “I think emotional abuse is about an unsafe environment in the family, which creates a fundamental insecurity for children.” This statement illuminates how experiences with EA might cause feelings of insecurity and unsafety in children.

In addition to describing EA based on the environment in the family, the child welfare workers describe EA based on specific parental behaviors. They describe a range of behaviors that might comprise EA. Across the focus groups, the child welfare workers include parental behavior that is both actively harmful and parental absence of warmth and support when describing EA. This is illuminated in the following utterance:

I think it (EA) is connected to emotional care or emotional care competence. If you are not sensitive enough or don't interpret your children's need for comfort, being seen, heard, or feeling understood, then the child feels rejected or that they have no value or that they don't matter. But it might be easier to think about the harder, strong expressions like children being threatened, violated, or manipulated.

In addition to including a variety of behaviors in EA, this quotation sheds light upon how it might be easier to focus on the strong, or actively harmful, expressions like threats, violations, and manipulations than children's need for comfort and understanding. This child welfare worker also connects EA to emotional care or emotional care competence. As indicated in the previous theme, emotional care appears to be a more familiar and preferred term by the participants. When child welfare workers discuss EA, they tend to focus on parents' ability to provide emotional care for their children. When they assess children's emotional care as inadequate, several child welfare workers describe that they would say or write for example: “this is not sufficient emotional care of the child,” rather than labelling children's experiences that might be emotionally or psychologically harmful for them as EA.

In the discussions of EA, several child welfare workers questioned the relationship between EA and emotional neglect. There were a few variations in how this relationship was perceived. Some child welfare workers separated these two concepts and said, for example, that “emotional neglect is some kind of passivity, while emotional abuse is a more active way of being.” Others perceived EA and emotional neglect to be closely connected and reflected upon them as “parts of the holistic emotional care you receive as a child.”

### 3.3. Taking a child's perspective on emotional abuse

The third theme is closely related to the second, as it illuminates how child welfare workers emphasize taking a child's perspective on EA as well as the importance of promoting the voice and the perspective of the child when working with EA.

When describing EA, a few participants express that regardless of the cause and the context of the abuse, it is illegal. They further discuss that emotionally abusive parental acts are illegal despite the potential consequences of such acts for the children. Yet, several child welfare workers indicate that this is challenging, because children experience specific, and similar, situations differently. The participants also describe challenges with evaluating when certain parental acts are simply a parenting style, or parental practice, and

when the behaviors should be regarded as EA. In this regard, several child welfare workers describe that parental behavior might be considered emotionally abusive when it is a persistent pattern or repeated behavior that causes harm to the child's development: "I think it is about repeated episodes, when it impacts children's life and harm."

Across the focus groups, the child welfare workers emphasized the importance of adopting a child's perspective when working with EA:

It is saying to, or about the child, "the child is so hopeless," this is "not possible," and expressing that everything is difficult and wrong with the child. When children experience this, they adopt it as their perception of themselves. I really think about how it affects the child's self-esteem and self-image.

As this example indicates, child welfare workers are concerned with taking a child's perspective when describing EA. It also sheds light upon the severe damage that EA might do to the children. Regardless of whether the child welfare workers describe EA based on parental behavior, relationships, or family environment, as described in the second theme, they all emphasized the consequences of experiences with EA on children's feelings of not being wanted, loved, and good enough. They often do this by including how the parental acts affect the child: "It is neglect. Rejection, mockery, sarcasm, irony. It is about whatever you do as a child, it is not good enough."

The participants are consistent when describing EA as harmful for the children. Contrary to this, they discuss and reflect upon their uncertainties of how to evaluate and assess EA and how it harms the child: "It is hard to assess; when is enough, enough? What is too much emotional abuse, right? With physical abuse, it is easier to draw a line, but with emotional abuse, it is a harder assessment, I think." This quote illuminates how the child welfare workers face a balancing act when it comes to assessing how severe a situation is for a child. It also illuminates how the child welfare workers emphasized that they are more used to, or have more experience with, making explicit and justified assessments of physical abuse than EA. Regarding this, the child welfare workers emphasized the importance of having repeated conversations with children to encourage children to share their perspectives and to improve the opportunity to identify children's experiences with EA. A child welfare worker expressed, "We need to keep promoting children's voice and perspectives. We need to get better at giving the children a voice." In relation to this, a few child welfare workers reflect upon how they will not understand children's statements and experiences as EA if they are not aware of EA as a concept and a concern in the family: "We can have as many conversations with children as we want, but if we are not aware of EA, we will never identify it."

#### 3.4. Emotional abuse is part of a complex situation

The last theme centers around the fact that EA is frequently one element in a complex situation in the families in need of support from the CWS. The findings focus on how EA is rarely the main concern in the family but is rather considered an overlapping and underlying element of other forms of child abuse. The theme also sheds light upon the idea that child welfare workers might be less aware of EA than for example physical abuse, and that they unconsciously perceive EA as less serious than physical abuse.

Further, the child welfare workers mainly acknowledge EA to be frequent among children in need of support from CWS. Additionally, they describe that "emotional abuse rarely comes alone," and that "I think that it's rare that we see emotional abuse as a single element, as the only thing a child experiences in the family." These expressions shed light on how participants meet families with complex problems and that EA is considered one element of the complexity. The participants further discuss that this complexity might constrain the level of awareness of EA among child welfare workers: There are so many elements we investigate when it comes to a child's physical and emotional care, so I am very unsure about how aware we are about what we investigate at what time. Another participant mentions, "I think we do not think concretely about emotional abuse in our work. It's not like we dive into this concept and think about what it does with a child and what help the parents in these cases' needs." In these two expressions, the child welfare workers describe how the complexity in child welfare cases affects their awareness of what they focus on at what time. In the latter quote, the child welfare worker also describes how EA is an element they rarely work explicitly with in different phases of child welfare work. Particularly, in two focus groups, the child welfare workers discuss that if they are to write about EA, the descriptions need to be clear and obvious:

If we write the word emotional abuse, we need to have clear descriptions about what it is. Before we write that we assess that children have experienced physical and emotional abuse the description is very clear, and obvious. Then maybe we use the word. But if not, we rarely use the term.

In this quote, the child welfare worker illuminates how EA needs to be clearly expressed before they write or use the word EA. This is elaborated on in the following example:

In cases where the emotional abuse has been extremely severe, it is so clear that it is emotional abuse, and then it is easier to thematize it throughout the investigation, when we conclude and how we describe how this is not consistent with being a caregiver for a child. But in these cases, it is so obvious that it is emotionally abusive behavior. It kind of flashes in our faces. But it is a shame that the other cases, where emotional abuse is not as visible, where we are not able to describe it, the emotional abuse just continues. If we had stopped maybe, taken the time. Maybe we would have seen it then?

This example illuminates how child welfare workers tend to be more aware of EA as part of the complexity in the family if EA is perceived as severe and obvious. It also illuminates that the more concretely the child welfare workers can describe a child's situation and experiences with EA, the clearer they can be when it comes to what support the child and family need. The abovementioned example also emphasizes that in cases in which the main concern is EA, the child welfare workers are more able to thematize it

throughout their work. Simultaneously, the expressions shed light on how EA may remain a silent part of the complexity in cases in which EA is not the main concern of the case. Lastly, the child welfare workers reflect upon how they might have considered EA as an inherent aspect in the family if they have had the time to reflect and think when working with such complex cases.

In the discussion on EA and the complex situations in the families in need of support from the CWS, the child welfare workers often discuss EA in relation to other forms of child abuse:

We divide it into physical abuse, sexual abuse, EA and neglect, but is it possible not to experience EA if you experience physical abuse? Something emotional about it, right? It does something with your emotions being violated like that, whether it is physical or emotional.

This excerpt indicates how the child welfare worker shares knowledge regarding how child abuse and maltreatment can be operationalized, and how EA is described to co-exist, in particular, with physical abuse. The participants are consistent when describing how EA is as harmful as, or even more harmful, than physical abuse. Throughout the interviews, the child welfare workers also began to question whether EA is an underlying element of physical abuse. In this regard, the child welfare workers describe how their concern with having evidence and documenting the circumstances around a child might affect their awareness on EA. The child welfare workers in the focus groups further describe how this might lead to them being more concerned with physical abuse, as this is perceived to be more concrete, measurable, and possible to make evidence of. This is illuminated in the following expression:

I have met children saying that, if I just knew what makes them so angry that they hit, I would stop. And again, we get concerned with how often the parents hit, right. Rather than listening to what the children actually say. I think we do that, listen, and take that into account in a holistic assessment of the child's care situation. But I do not think we document it well, and in a way that it is possible to illuminate in court, or in the social welfare board. We need to be clearer on the written part when it comes to emotional abuse, I think.

This expression sheds light on how the attention of child welfare workers tends to focus on the concrete and measurable manner in what the children say and how their expressions on experiences with EA may not be focused on. This expression also illustrates that they consider the children's emotions and concerns in their holistic assessments of the children's situation, but that these considerations are rarely elaborated on or described clearly in their written documentation. This child welfare worker also describes how this aspect makes it challenging to utilize written documentation regarding whether the child's situation should be illuminated in the social welfare board. In these discussions, the child welfare workers reflect upon how this lacking documentation may lead to EA being underreported, under-communicated, and underestimated:

Emotional abuse is under reported, it is more visible with bruises, and the emotional abuse is more diffuse. We write about it, but it is much easier to get sympathy, and attention on the bruises, rather than children who have experienced a lot of conflicts and abuse in the home. Yelling, anger and aggression. I am afraid it gets under communicated, and underestimated what it means. For the children you know...

The above quotation illuminates how a child welfare worker reflects upon how child welfare workers might under-report, under-communicate, and underestimate how experiences of EA harm children. The quotation also indicates that EA is perceived as being less serious than physical abuse.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study explores how Norwegian child welfare workers describe and understand EA of children. Overall, this study reveals that the nature of EA was unfamiliar to the child welfare workers, and that there is a low level of knowledge and awareness regarding EA among the participants. Like previous research, EA is in this study, perceived as difficult to explain and conceptualize, name and address (Iwaniec et al., 2007; North, 2022). Additionally, it is found that the child welfare workers are unfamiliar with EA, as it is a concept that they rarely discuss and reflect upon both with colleagues, other professionals, parents and children. Even though EA was unfamiliar to the child welfare workers, and they found it difficult to talk about, they clearly expressed their knowledge of EA when given the opportunity to reflect upon it and direct their attention to it. Accordingly, the findings show that the low level of knowledge and awareness of EA in child welfare work is connected to each other, in terms of knowledge creating awareness and opposite. This study, thus, demonstrates a need for reflection among child welfare workers about their awareness and knowledge of EA, to enable and create new insights, perspectives and expanded understandings of the concept.

In line with the child-centric values in the Norwegian CWS, this study demonstrates that child welfare workers hold children's perspectives and narratives on their own situation in high regard when it comes to making assessments about the child's situation. This is particularly important in the work with EA, since its impact is difficult to observe and understand, and that it is challenging to investigate which aspects of abuse children feel most strongly (Iwaniec et al., 2006; North, 2022). The analysis indicates that the participants are principally concerned with the emotional care children receive, and how harm may be caused to the emotional development of children. This relates to the values, beliefs and norms of child-rearing and parenting practices in Norway, all of which strongly emphasize children's emotions and the extent to which they feel safe and receive sufficient emotional care (Fævelen et al., 2023). However, as EA is evident from the quality of the relationships and interactions between parents and children and has severe consequences for children's feelings of being safe and loved, it is somewhat surprising that EA was such an unfamiliar concept among the participants in this study. Moreover, the study shows that children's experiences with EA are rarely interpreted and labelled as that, but rather connected to concepts as emotional care. The study, thus, emphasize the importance of strengthening child welfare workers



knowledge and awareness about EA in relation to related concepts, to enable them to more effectively identify, name and address EA.

This study demonstrates that emotional care is a term the child welfare workers prefer when communicating with parents. By replacing the term EA with emotional care, they frame their conversations with parents in a way they perceive less scary to manage the challenges and complexity of child welfare work. The findings indicate that this framing may lead to trivializing children's experiences with EA, and to misconceptions about the severity of the situation. This may offer fewer opportunities to the child welfare workers to name and address the abuse, but also it may lead to implementation of measures that are not adjusted or tailored to the individual child and family's situation. In sum, the analysis indicated that the focus on and knowledge of emotional care in the context of Norwegian child welfare work, has the potential to overshadow the knowledge and understanding of concepts such as EA, even though this has a clear connection to the ideals of parenting practice in the Norwegian society. Accordingly, the study demonstrates the need to improve child welfare workers ability to skillfully communicate with parents about EA, to be able to be more clear about their concerns, and strengthen decision making processes in cases of abuse and violence in order to providing sufficient help and support.

When the child welfare workers describe EA, they include both the actively harmful behaviors of parents, and the absence of parental warmth and support in their understanding of EA. This corresponds with the conceptualization of EA by [Hart et al. \(2018\)](#), as outlined earlier in this article. The study further demonstrates that EA is understood as overlapping with other forms of abuse, and as an invisible aspect of the complexity in a child's experiences of abuse and maltreatment. Moreover, the child welfare workers highly acknowledge the severe potential harmful effects of children's experiences with EA and that many of the children they meet have such experiences. When discussing EA, the child welfare workers are more focused on the difficulties of clarifying the potential risk of harm, rather than focusing on the level of support the families need, which relates to the risk-oriented approach in child welfare work ([Aadnanes & Syrstad, 2021](#); [Christiansen et al., 2019](#)). The child welfare workers, further, clearly express their uncertainties according to making assessments and decisions on when parental behaviors are considered EA and when these experiences are harmful for children. Like previous research, the findings demonstrate that assessing children's care situation is particularly challenging when working with EA, since a professional consensus has not been reached on what constitutes emotionally abusive and neglectful behaviors ([Munro, 2020](#); [Wolfe & McIsaac, 2011](#)).

The difficulties of reaching a consensus about EA, challenges the zero-tolerance ideal against abuse and violence in Norway, as it is hard to be clear about what to prevent and what to protect children from. The intangible and invisible nature of EA, further, makes it difficult to conceptualize, document and make evidence of EA, as also demonstrated in previous research ([Iwaniec et al., 2006](#); [Iwaniec et al., 2007](#); [North, 2022](#)). Moreover, the study demonstrates that EA is underreported, under-communicated, and underestimated, and that the focus and awareness of child welfare workers tend to aim against physical abuse which they understand as easier to define, and as more concrete and measurable than EA. As outlined, EA has received sparse attention both in research and policy (e.g., [Brassard et al., 2020](#); [Kloppen et al., 2015](#); [Kojan et al., 2020](#)), and this study indicate that this is reflected also in Norwegian child welfare work. An overly focus on the physical aspects of abuse, has the potential of trivializing children's experiences of EA, and cause inaccurate decisions regarding children's care situations. Accordingly, the study disclose a need for an explicit focus on EA as both a standalone form for abuse, and as an overlapping and underlying element in other forms of abuse and violence to support child welfare workers in their decision-making in cases of abuse and violence. This is crucial when it comes to trying to understand the complex nature of EA, as well as understanding the complexity of children's experiences with abuse and violence. It, thus, has the potential to strengthen professional discretion and decision-making processes regarding the level of support children and families are in need of.

#### 4.1. Limitations of the study

Despite this study shedding light on Norwegian child welfare workers' descriptions and understanding of EA of children, this study has limitations. First, one limitation of the study could be linked to how the study was conducted in a small set of child welfare offices and that the descriptions and understanding of EA of children discussed in this article does not necessarily represent the overall descriptions and understanding of EA of children among Norwegian child welfare workers. Second, in the search for patterns in the data my role as a researcher might have affected which patterns and interpretations I pursued. I have, however, struggled to reduce bias and strengthened the quality of the study as described in an earlier section of this article. Third, the study included both online and in-person focus group interviews. Challenges with online interviews were considered when deciding on the usability of the digital platforms. The digital interviews aimed at providing the participants with sufficient space and time to talk, facilitating the discussion with careful attention, and being sensitive to facial expressions and the available body language of the participants.

## 5. Conclusion and implications for practice

In conclusion, this study brings to light how the concept of EA is unfamiliar, and that there is a low level of knowledge and awareness regarding EA among child welfare workers. The study argues that children's experiences with EA are being trivialized to maintain good relations with parents, and that child welfare workers deal with a balancing act when it comes to attending to the needs of the child and collaborating with parents. Accordingly, the study demonstrates a need for child welfare workers to develop their skills in addressing and communicating about EA with parents to manage their complex work with this concept more effectively. Furthermore, the study argue for the need of reflections and discussions among child welfare workers regarding their awareness of EA, and how they investigate, emphasize, assess, and work with the quality of family relationships and interactions, parental behavior, and children's experiences illuminated by the concept of EA. Such discussions have the potential to enhance the abilities of child welfare workers to describe, communicate about, and document EA. Furthermore, the study has the potential to argue that the current

approaches, the prevailing knowledge base and ideals for parenting in the Norwegian CWS have the potential to cause a lack of awareness of EA. Accordingly, reflection about how these approaches, knowledge bases and ideals have implications for how child welfare workers connect and classify a concrete situation to a professional understanding of cases of abuse and violence, is central to strengthen professional discretion in child welfare work with EA.

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## Declaration of competing interest

None.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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