

# Investigating Social Workers' Risk and Safety Assessment Process to Identify Parents' Capacity to Change Their Behaviour

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## Abstract

Globally, social workers remove children from the parental home and place them in alternative care when home circumstances pose a danger to the children's development. Prior to such removal, the social worker is required to conduct a risk and safety assessment of the parental home, involving both the child/ren and their parents, to identify parental capacity to change their own behaviour in preparation for later reunification. There is a gap in the literature about possible problems associated with assessing parents' ability to change their behaviour, and the effective role of social workers in facilitating successful reunification. The study used a qualitative research approach, guided by an interpretivist paradigm and employing ethics of care as a theoretical lens, to investigate the process used by social workers to assess parents' capacity to change their behaviour. Purposive sampling was used to recruit nine social workers and eight parents from the Department of Social Development and Rata Social Services, a child protection organisation in the Waterberg District, South Africa. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The study reveals that there is a lack of standardisation in risk and safety assessments, inconsistencies in using these assessments, a lack of parental involvement in assessments, and poor communication between social workers and the parents of removed children. The study recommends the use of standardised risk and safety assessments that clearly identify parents' capacity to change their behaviour, communication channels, and ethical standards, prioritising parental



Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development

Volume 37 | Number 3 | 2025 | #19131 | 19 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/19131>

ISSN 2708-9355 (Online), ISSN 2520-0097 (Print)

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engagement in decision-making. Such standards can improve assessments and have a positive impact on successful reunification.

**Keywords:** risk and safety assessment; parents' capacity; change behaviour; parents; social workers

## Introduction and Background

In South Africa, parents have parental responsibilities and rights in respect of their children only if they fulfil the requirements of sections 19, 20, and 21 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Children's Act 38/2005). Parents are responsible for providing a home environment that supports their children's development. When they fail to fulfil this responsibility, it can result in the removal of the children and their placement in alternative care (Vial et al. 2020). Such children are in need of care and protection, as defined in section 150 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 in South Africa (Children's Act 38/2005). The purpose of section 150 is to provide a legal basis for state intervention when a child's safety, well-being, or development is at risk.

According to section 150 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005, a child is considered in need of care and protection if they face serious risks to their well-being or development. This includes situations where a child: has been abandoned, orphaned, and lacks a family member who is capable of providing care to the child; has been abused, neglected, or exploited; or lives in conditions that harm their physical, mental, or social well-being. It also applies to children who are exposed to serious risk, whose behaviour is uncontrollable and cannot be managed by their caregiver, or who are addicted to harmful substances without access to support. Additionally, children involved in child labour, sexual exploitation, or who are victims of trafficking fall under this category (Children's Act 38/2005). The removal of children from parents to alternative care is done by designated social workers, the only professionals recognised by the Children's Act 38 of 2005 to do so. Prior to the removal, the designated social worker must conduct an assessment to inform the court, which is responsible for issuing an order that will secure a suitable home for the child, in terms of section 157 of that Act. The assessment is known as a risk and safety assessment, and aims to assess the parents' capacity to change their behaviour, so that the child/ren may, at some later stage, be returned to the parental home.

A successful risk and safety assessment involves both the parents and their children and should be characterised by active communication between all parties involved (Lidström and Smith 2020). However, research reveals that parents are often excluded from the assessment processes due to systemic issues, time constraints, assumptions about their capacity, or a lack of clear guidelines. This exclusion undermines the goal of reunification, as meaningful engagement with parents is crucial for evaluating their childcare abilities and planning support interventions (Chambers et al. 2019; Potgieter and Hoosain 2018). Potgieter and Hoosain (2018) conclude that parents' exclusion from the process contributes to difficulties with reunification. Difficulties include a lack of

clear communication between social workers and parents, which can lead to misunderstandings and a lack of support for reunification. This can result in parents feeling disempowered, reducing motivation and engagement in regaining custody, and ultimately delaying or preventing successful reintegration. White, Hindley, and Jones (2014) criticise the risk and safety assessment for its limited contribution to reunification, despite the information it gives social workers on parents' capacity to change their behaviour. At the same time, parents' ability to change is a critical consideration, informing both the decision to remove the child and the long-term prospect of reunification.

Social work studies conducted globally have investigated parental change; however, many focus on assisting parents to change, investigating methodologies, intervention/treatment models, and professional skills (Marcenko et al. 2010; Miller and Rollnick 2013; Trotter 2015; Turnell and Edwards 1999). White, Hindley, and Jones (2014) report that the risk assessment field also makes a limited contribution to knowledge on this process. The Department of Social Development (DSD) in South Africa acknowledged an immediate necessity for developing a standardised approach for risk and safety assessment among social workers in child protection by developing a learner manual of seven modules, with module six specific to safety and risk assessment tools (Spies, Delpont, and Le Roux 2017). However, neither of these social work studies nor the learner manual provides the practitioner with in-depth guidance on assessing parents' capacities to change their behaviour. It is critical that social workers make well-informed decisions about parents' capacity to change behaviour, as the decision to remove a child, and the possibility of later reuniting the child with their parents, deeply affects parents and their children. Bentovim et al. (2013) reveal a gap in the literature regarding identifying specific challenges in assessing parental capacity to change, and the ways in which designated social workers can contribute to successful reunification. Furthermore, there are limited studies in South Africa investigating social workers' risk and safety assessment processes. Hence, this study sought to investigate social workers' risk and safety assessment processes used to identify parents' capacity to change behaviour.

## Parents' Capacity to Change Their Behaviour

Effective parent participation is important in child protection services, particularly for comprehensive assessment, as it has a significant impact on family outcomes (Lehtme and Toros 2020). Lehtme and Toros (2020) argue that there has been a paradigm shift in the practice of child protection, in that parents and families as a whole are now acknowledged as partners in decision-making, implying that their involvement in decisions is important. Thus, the modern outlook is that the child and their parents must be involved in the process in order to provide the best possible care (Arbeiter and Toros 2017). Arbeiter and Toros (2017) state that family engagement is an important part of the assessment process, as it promotes positive changes and families' well-being.

However, some caregivers describe the vulnerabilities experienced by themselves, their families, and their communities that can impede parental involvement, including both obvious and hidden weaknesses or hurdles (Van Niekerk and Ismail 2013). A study on paternal involvement found that agency practices and policies can create challenges for fathers. Furthermore, these challenges may limit fathers' participation in the case planning process and may also affect the agency's ability to make informed decisions about the child's best interests (Coakley, Washington, and Gruber 2018).

Lehtme and Toros (2020) discovered that parents may cooperate even when they are not happy with a social worker's decision, and even when they are excluded from the assessment process. The study reported that some parents found social workers to be judgemental, and working with them was unpleasant and taxing, which occasionally prevented them from contacting social workers to seek assistance in the future (Lehtme and Toros 2020). This finding correlates with a study by Hope and Van Wyk (2019), which highlighted the importance of the relationship between social workers and parents, showing that poor social worker attitudes or poor communication styles affect families' willingness to work with them. Cabiati and Raineri (2019) concur that the stigmatising attitudes of social workers can form a barrier to forming partnerships with parents. Hope and Van Wyk (2019) point out that difficulties in these relationships can also be caused by the attitudes and behaviours of family members.

## Theoretical Framework

The ethics of care is a moral theory that emphasises the significance of caring relationships, empathy, and interconnectedness in ethical decision-making (Botes 2000). According to Tronto (1993), there are four interconnected phases of caring: caring about; taking care of; giving care; and receiving care. This author points out that caring is a complex process that involves individuals, society, and political will. There are also four elements of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness. The elements of the ethics of care are embedded in each phase and intertwined with them (Tronto 1993). These phases and elements can guide ethical decision-making and moral development. The study focuses on the three elements of attentiveness, responsibility, and competence, since they pertain to the person providing care (the parent), while responsiveness pertains to the person receiving care (the child).

A caring relationship between the parents and children in need of care and protection should be based on empathy. Children in need of care and protection, because of parental circumstances will not necessarily express concerns about their safety; hence, it is crucial to include them in risk and safety assessments (Chambers et al. 2019; Potgieter and Hoosain 2018). Identifying parents' capacity to change reveals answers to the moral question of whether parents actually want to attend to the needs of their children. This act of wanting to attend to the child's needs (and the ability to do so) is known as attentiveness (Tronto 1993). Parents' participation in the risk and safety assessment is a step towards taking responsibility, which is the second element of care.

An indication that a parent wishes to act responsibly will help the social worker determine whether or not the parents are ready (or will become ready) to take care of their child. The decision for reunification should be based on the overall competency of the parents to care for their children—their motivation, thoughts, behaviours, knowledge, attitudes, and skills. The moral development of parents should also be a focus, in that parents should display some introspective ability, and acknowledge ways in which they may have contributed to the child's removal. They should also be able to explain how they intend to change their behaviour in order to be reunified with their children.

## Research Methodology

### Research Approach and Design

The study employed a qualitative research approach guided by an interpretivist paradigm, which seeks “to understand social phenomena in their context” (Rehman and Alharthi 2016, 56). This approach yielded rich qualitative data that enabled a deep understanding of the role of social workers in assessing parental capacity to change behaviour, and that could be useful in future tool development.

The qualitative approach was appropriate because it allowed the researchers to use an interpretive descriptive design (Burdine, Thorne, and Sandhu 2021) in seeking to understand how social workers conduct risk and safety assessments to assess parents' capacity to change behaviour after a child is removed to alternative care, the ways in which parents participate in the assessment, and whether their participation improves their capacity to change their behaviour for future reunification with their children.

### Research Population and Sampling

The study took place in Modimolle municipality in the Waterberg District, Limpopo Province, South Africa, where 320 children are cared for by child and youth care centres (CYCC). The participants included social workers from the DSD and Rata Social Services, a child protection organisation (CPO), as well as parents of removed children, to provide data on the risk and safety assessment.

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique (Geyer 2021), was employed to recruit nine social workers and eight parents from DSD and Rata Social Services – Nylstroom, who expressed interest in taking part in the study. The inclusion criteria for social workers were that they had to have been employed for two years by either DSD or by a local CPO, such as Rata Social Services, Christelik-Maatskaplike Raad (CMR), or Suid-Afrikaanse Vroue Federasie (SAVF), providing statutory services to families. This ensured that participants were well equipped to handle the risk and safety assessments of parents and children in need of care and protection. The exclusion criterion was social workers not working in the field of child protection.

The inclusion criteria for parents required that they had experienced the removal of their children for at least two years and had not been reunited with their children at the time of the study. They had to be able to communicate fluently in one of the languages the interviews would be conducted in: English, Afrikaans, or Sepedi, the languages used by most people in the Waterberg District. Also, the participants had to reside in the Waterberg District and be willing to take part in face-to-face interviews. The exclusion criterion was parents whose children had not been removed after the risk and safety assessment.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

An independent person sent emails to the Head of Department of Social Development in the Waterberg District, Limpopo Province, and the municipal social work supervisors requesting permission from DSD and CPO social workers to participate and reveal their client lists. Prior to collecting data, a mediator shared information on the purpose of the study, research methodology, data collection methods, and ethical considerations with all participants. All read and signed informed consent forms prior to the scheduling of any appointments.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the social workers (Geyer 2021) were conducted at the offices of the DSD and Rata CPO in the Modimolle municipality. The interviews with parents were conducted at their homes. After consulting the literature, the researchers compiled an interview schedule to guide interviews (Roulston and Choi 2018). Semi-structured interviews enabled the researchers to probe interesting information that emerged from the interviews (Conghurst 2010) and to clarify information.

### **Data Analysis**

The researchers used an audio recorder to record the interviews and made field notes to gain an understanding of what participants' assessment experiences meant to them. The researchers transcribed the data, organised it, interpreted the transcripts, and analysed the data, which involved coding data where necessary to organise information and gain insights (Fouché, Strydom, and Roestenburg 2021).

The researchers followed Tesch's (1990) approach in analysing the data (Creswell 2020). This provided a useful process for transcribing unstructured data in eight steps. The eight steps ensure that a systematic process is followed in analysing textual data. To ensure the correctness of the analysis, an independent social worker, familiar with research processes and trained in the same method of analysis, acted as an external co-coder (Nowell et al. 2017). To increase the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers concentrated on these aspects: dependability, conformability, and transferability (Rubin and Babbie 2009).

## **Ethical Aspects and Considerations**

Before the study began, the participants signed a voluntary consent form agreeing to participate in the study and to have their interviews recorded. The participants' privacy and confidentiality were respected, and ethical guidelines were followed (Bless, Higson-Smith, and Sithole 2013). To ensure confidentiality, as mentioned above, the semi-structured interviews were held in the social workers' private offices at DSD and Rata, and to avoid disturbances, the interviews with parents were conducted in their homes, behind closed doors. Participants' identifying information was kept private using coding, and both the mediator and the co-coder signed a confidentiality agreement (Geyer 2021). The researchers obtained ethical approval from North-West University's Faculty of Health Sciences Ethics Office for Research, Training, and Support (NWU-00078-23-S1) before commencing with the study.

## **Research Findings**

The research findings describe social workers' risk and safety assessment processes for identifying parents' capacity to change their behaviour. Interviews were conducted with nine social workers and eight parents. Three themes, one with four subthemes, emerged from the collected data, as revealed below with verbatim quotations from the participants' transcripts.

### **Theme 1: Assessment Tools that Social Workers use During Initial Assessment**

Assessment is a dynamic process that evaluates both historical and current information to determine the most appropriate course of action to meet a child's protective needs (Hope and Van Wyk 2018). Participants were supposed to use Case Work Form 9 (CW-09), which was developed by DSD and is required for every case managed by social workers, as the initial assessment tool to develop an intervention plan. In addition to the CW-09, participants were also expected to use standard risk and safety assessment tools during the initial assessment to determine whether the children were in need of care and protection in accordance with section 155 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005. Although some participants were aware of these risk and safety assessment methods, they indicated that they did not use them. Only two social work participants reported using the CW-09 form. These two social workers had the following to say:

So, what I did in this case, the tool that I've utilised, is the tool of the department, the CW-09, which is the assessment form, which must go hand in glove with assessing the preliminary case. And then, you do the contracting and the planning of the case. (Social worker 01)

I will start with an intake form, which is the reporting of the case, and after that, you fill out the CW-09, which is an assessment form whereby you will be looking at the health of the child, the risk of the child, and the resources that can assist you for intervention. (Social worker 02)

One participant mentioned that one of the tools used during the initial assessment was the risk and safety assessment tool from DSD, as outlined in the learner manual of risk and safety assessment tools for the South African child protection services:

In social work, we have forms that guide us when we are intervening, depending on the type of case that we come across. So, with cases that involve children, there are risk and safety assessment tools; they come in the form of forms that we complete. They are the ones that guide us in terms of checking as to how safe or unsafe the child is. (Social worker 04)

On the other hand, two participants shared that they did not use any particular tools:

Usually, I don't use any tool per se, but we focus mostly on the children, like, for example, the Children's Act. I don't usually use any specific tool. (Social worker 09)

It's a difficult one because there's not really enough tools. It's the interview and the home visits and observation ... (Social worker 03)

The participants' varied responses suggest that no standardised assessment tools are used to assess parents' capacity to change their behaviour. Instead, the social workers' responses indicate that assessments focused mainly on determining whether the children required care and protection, while neglecting the critical aspect of assessing the parents' potential for change. In this process, parents were treated more as sources of information than as active participants in the assessment.

A risk and safety assessment involves analysing current attitudes, behaviours, and family functioning to determine the presence of any threats to the child's immediate safety (Guidi 2016). The absence of a standardised assessment method and the disregard for the existing standard risk and safety assessment tool can arguably undermine the effectiveness of the overall intervention process. Assessment tools should assist social workers to respond to the uniqueness of each case and move towards plans that the family will enact (Bunn and Rostom 2013). Social workers must understand each family member's unique situation, thoughts, beliefs, and values, and strive to identify and understand the meanings and values they perceive in their stories (Bunn and Rostom 2013). The assessment of parents should therefore be thorough and participative. It should assist in developing a plan that will work for that family, and lead to a successful reunification.

Based on the findings, it appears that social workers lack a shared understanding of the assessment process and the appropriate tools for assessing parents in cases where children are in need of care and protection, highlighting a significant weakness.



## **Theme 2: The Risk and Safety Assessment Process**

A risk assessment is a purposeful process of gathering information on the child, the parent, the family, and their environmental context to determine the probability and degree to which a child may be harmed in the future (Lätsch et al. 2021). Regardless of the benefits or usefulness of child protection assessment tools, adequate assessment relies on comprehensive, specialised judgement. The process depends on a systemic approach that is all-inclusive and goes beyond just using a particular assessment tool (Pecora, Chahine, and Graham 2013).

The participants indicated that the risk and safety assessment process includes assessing the family background and the safety of the child. One task of child protection practitioners in conducting assessments is to seek and clarify information about cases that have been brought forward to the agency (Vis, Lauritzen, and Fossum 2021). This includes gathering information from relevant sources, such as family and other involved individuals who may know the child and their family (Lauritzen, Vis, and Fossum 2018). Participants said the following about their risk and safety assessments:

Well, that's a long one. It starts with the intake, gathering all the identifying information. And then the proof thereof, so that would be the ID and the birth certificate, the road to health book. Once you have all the identifying information, the interview, home visit, or office visit ... (Social worker 03)

After completing the assessment form, I also completed a process note, which is the requirement that goes hand in glove with the intake form. So that at least after I've done the preliminary assessment, I will be able to indicate the plan to tackle [i.e. to take] the case forward. (Social worker 01)

The tools that I've used are just like now—there's an assessment form, which we use to assess the background of the family, and another one is the risk assessment. (Social worker 02)

In this study, an assessment refers to an ongoing, participatory process that seeks to understand the client (both child and parent) and their situation. An assessment establishes the foundation for planning the intervention. But most parent participants had no understanding that the process is called an assessment or what their involvement in the process is supposed to entail. The parent participants mentioned that they had complied with what the social worker asked of them. Three parent participants expressed the following:

They're just asking questions and we're telling our side of the story. (Parent 01)

But there were meetings, plenty of meetings, before this was happening, before they took the kids. (Parent 02)

So, it happened that when they came to investigate and asked me what happened, I shared the story as I knew it ... (Parent 06)

Lidström and Smith (2020) state that successful assessments involve both the parents and the children, and active communication between all parties. Social workers in child protection are required to take an integrated and holistic approach, which is fundamental to social work assessment and subsequent intervention (Shiller and Strydom 2018). Given that social workers need to do more than simply remove the child from risk, an assessment of parental capacity to change behaviour should form an integral part of the risk and safety assessment (Platt and Riches 2016). Involving parents and understanding their situation not only gives social workers evidence but helps to ensure that they are able to act in the best interest of the children.

### **Theme 3: Social Workers' Intervention and Support to Parents**

According to Parker (2013), a thorough assessment allows the social worker to have an informed discussion with clients about what will happen next. It also serves as the basis of selecting the most appropriate intervention and determining how goals and objectives will be achieved. Four subthemes emerged from this theme: parenting programmes rendered to parents; parental reluctance to cooperate with social workers' intervention and support; family reluctance to cooperate with social workers' intervention and support; and social workers' lack of communication.

#### *Subtheme 3.1: Parenting Programme Rendered to Parents*

Social workers provide two types of interventions and support to parents: a parenting programme and reunification services. Social work participants shared the following:

If it's a case of neglect, then the agreement is normally we remove children for 90 days. Then the agreement is, as we're removing the child, we'll be working with the parent. And then improving the situation that led to the removal. So, giving parents courses or whatever the issues that were there ... (Social worker 08)

Usually, the plan of action is parenting. We do parenting first. (Social worker 09)

The plan of action was that she will go for rehabilitation since she was not charged at the court. (Social worker 05)

Lehtme and Toros (2020) perceived parental engagement as very important in the practice of child protection, with regard to client change as well as the possibility of improving the outcome later. Contradictory to what social workers shared above; most parent participants expressed that they had not been invited to participate in any parenting programmes:

No, they didn't give us programmes or ... no. (Parent 02)

No, she didn't give me anything like that. Not at all. (Parent 05)

No, I'd honestly be lying if I ever said we did. (Parent 08)

Ja [Yes]. They would bring the children, we come and visit here by the Abraham Kriel [Children's Home] and the children would come and visit us, but there were no parent programmes that we could do at CMR. (Parent 01)

Only two parent participants (parents 06 and 07) remembered taking part in parenting skills programmes; none of the others recalled such a programme. A well-run parenting skills programme can positively contribute to parents' capacity to change their behaviour. Therefore, failing to offer clients adequate programme intervention, such as parental skills programmes, can have a negative effect on the intervention, since parental skills are likely to remain unchanged.

### *Subtheme 3.2: Parental reluctance to cooperate with social workers' intervention and support*

Newton (2020) noted that social workers should collaborate closely with parents to create meaningful intervention plans that effectively address the unique requirements of each family, in order to reduce the possibility of further harm to children. In this regard, social work participants said:

I told her that I would work with her after the court had made a judgement because she [the mother] was incarcerated. They held her in for six months, if I'm right. They took her, and I told her that when she comes back, she has to attend programmes, and she didn't agree. (Social worker 02)

Because once they know your intentions ... that you're assessing in order to remove the child from their care, at that time they're confused; they feel like you're policing them; sometimes they would not allow you to have access to their home and even their significant others ... (Social worker 02)

We involve parents when we remove the child, and other family members, so that they will understand what is going on and the reasons behind the removal of the child ... some of them participate; some of them are not willing to participate because of anger that the child is going to be removed. (Social worker 06)

What can be deduced from the above responses, particularly from social worker 06, is that after the child has been removed, an attempt is made to sit down with parents to discuss the way forward.

When a child is removed from the care of the parents, an individual development plan for each child must be developed, as well as a treatment plan for the parents, in order to assist with their reunification. The plan must be reviewed after two years to assess whether the child can, in fact, be placed back in the care of the parents. This “plan and review” approach ensures that everyone understands the expected tasks, progress, and completion dates, as stated by Van Staden and Malan (2023). They further recommend the use of the signs-of-safety approach, where social workers incorporate the family and their own professional knowledge in risk assessment and case planning. The signs-of-safety approach actively engages individuals, families, groups, or communities in the planning and review to help them overcome obstacles and reach their full potential. This approach ensures that everyone understands their tasks and expected progress in meeting the plan’s objectives.

### *Subtheme 3.3: Family reluctance to cooperate with social workers’ intervention and support*

Some social work participants explained that parents sometimes could not commit to taking part in the assessment or intervention for valid reasons, and in other cases, parents were unwilling to engage, showing reluctance that stemmed from resistance, mistrust, or a lack of motivation to participate in the process. Comments included:

And unfortunately, the father of the children was not accessible because he was in police custody and also the mother at that point was not accessible. (Social worker 01)

In this case, it was mostly the mother that was involved. The father ... although we never got to speak to him because they said he was working somewhere far ... (Social worker 04)

We agreed with the mother that we place the child in the CYCC. After having placed him there temporarily for three months, I tried to meet with the maternal family, but neither of them was willing to take the child in. So, he was forced to stay in the CYCC, but we are hoping to place him in foster care someday. (Social worker 04)

From the word go, they didn’t agree, and I think for some of the clients, it’s “we need to fight this” or “I need to turn this around.” They think in their heads, “I need to disagree” ... (Social worker 03)

Parents’ and families’ unwillingness to participate can stem from a lack of knowledge, or from circumstances beyond their control, or from lack of commitment to an intervention intended to assist them overcome their problematic behaviours. Lehtme and Toros (2020) add that one of the most difficult aspects of the child protection process is getting parents to be part of the process.

### *Subtheme 3.4: Social workers’ lack of communication*

The parent participants expressed that lack of communication as well as poor communication styles on the part of social workers affected them badly. Two parents

reported that their children had been removed without their knowledge, while parent 06 was not even aware of what had led to their removal; the assessment took place only afterwards. Parent participants shared the following:

The social workers came, and the police were also involved, and when I came home later that day, I found the kids gone, and the story was then relayed to me. I had no idea what had happened ... (Parent 06)

So, when I got back, that's when I heard that the children are gone ... (Parent 08)

No... That wasn't done... I signed papers; I wasn't aware of what I signed ... (Parent 05)

That's actually all ... some people that saw me are mean ... you have social workers ... a lot of people are not sensitive. It's like, they're doing their job and that's that. (Parent 04)

What I think I could have said to them is that they could have also assisted me personally with counselling. (Parent 07)

It is evident from the statements that some participants did not know what an assessment was, and that the social workers' lack of communication limited their involvement. Insufficient social work communication and poor communication styles can negatively affect the situation. When a child protection social worker executes activities without the parents' agreement, the parents usually express feelings of disempowerment (Syrstad and Slettebø 2020). This is supported by Erasmus and Harris (2023), who argue that although child removal is a statutory process, social workers should involve the parents. The involvement of parents in the removal process is valuable in that it fosters a sense of collaboration and partnership between the parents and social workers, giving parents a sense that their opinions and feelings are respected (Serbati 2017).

Many parents affected by child protection services have experienced some form of disadvantage in their own lives and childhoods (Broadhurst and Mason 2020). This shows the importance of providing support or counselling to parents. Moreover, even though there is strong agreement that children must be protected from harm, Broadhurst and Mason (2020) argue that there are solid moral and economic reasons to provide parents with ongoing support after their children have been removed. This helps with reunification and can prevent repeat removal.

## Discussion

The findings reveal inconsistency in social workers' practice of the risk and safety assessment, with some participants stating that they did not use the risk and safety assessment tool, or any particular tool, in their assessments. A lack of standardisation was evident in social workers' accounts, which mentioned the use of formal methods of gathering information from the parents such as interviews and home visits that are not

informed by a structured risk and safety assessment tool which aims at assessing the parent's capacity to change their behaviour. Two separate assessment tools (CW-09 and the risk and safety assessment) are supposed to be used to determine whether children need care and protection, according to section 155 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005. Use of these instruments does not detract from the importance of assessing parents' ability to change their behaviour and assisting them to do so through parenting programmes. According to Platt and Riches (2016), the emphasis of the risk and safety assessment is on identifying parental capacity to change. Tronto (1993) expands on this, stating that the social worker conducting a risk and safety assessment should look not only at the parents' capacity to change behaviour, but at their attentiveness to the child's needs, and their willingness to take responsibility for meeting those needs.

The social workers in this study assessed the background of the family and the child's safety, which informed the intervention to protect the child from harm post-reunification. Lätsch et al. (2021) state that a risk assessment is a purposeful process of gathering information on the child, the parent, the family, and their environment to determine the probability and degree to which a child may be harmed in the future.

Despite the weakness of the assessment tools used by the social workers, interventions such as parenting programmes and rehabilitation were offered to some parents, according to the social workers. Providing parents with support after their children have been removed helps with reunification and the prevention of repeat appearances (Broadhurst and Mason 2020). However, while social workers described parenting programmes and rehabilitation services as key intervention strategies, most parent participants indicated they had not been provided with access to these programmes. Participation in parenting programmes enhances parents' competency in caregiving and facilitates a far smoother and more positive reunification. The findings indicate that, as stated previously, in addition to not being offered parenting programmes, some parents were not included in the assessment process. Lack of parental involvement is the most challenging aspect of a child's protection process (Lehtme and Toros 2020). However, it is important to involve parents as this fosters healthy communication between parents, the child, and other parties (Erasmus and Harris 2023; Lidström and Smith 2020).

The findings also reveal a fundamental problem with communication between social workers and parents. Parents reported feeling excluded from decision-making or being inadequately informed during the removal of their children. Some were not informed of their children's removal until after the fact and experienced a lack of support during and after the process. Communication gaps affect emotions and disempower parents, potentially reducing their willingness to participate in parenting programmes.

The systematic discrepancies revealed in this study necessitate that the risk and safety assessment tools, interventions such as parenting programmes, and communication protocols between the social workers and parents be greatly improved.

## Recommendations for Future Research

It is recommended that a qualitative study be undertaken to explore the lived experiences of children whose parents have participated in a risk and safety assessment and subsequently completed a parenting programme intervention. This research should explicitly use an ethics of care framework, emphasising the element of responsiveness. This approach would provide a thorough assessment of whether such interventions improve parents' ability to care for their children post-reunification, an aspect that has not received much attention. Such research would contribute important insights into whether these interventions genuinely enhance parents' ability to engage in responsive, nurturing care, thereby strengthening the long-term sustainability and well-being of reunified families. The findings could also inform the refinement of existing programmes and the development of child-centred post-reunification support strategies.

## Limitations

A key limitation of this study is that it was conducted within the DSD and included participation from only one of the four CPOs in the Waterberg district. This limited scope may affect generalisation of the findings.

## Conclusion

This study highlights significant deficiencies and discrepancies in the use of risk and safety assessment tools in child protection processes, indicating a lack of standardisation. The dependence of social workers on information gathering techniques that are not informed by a standardised risk and safety assessment tool that aims at assessing the parents' capacity to change their behaviour is concerning. Equally concerning is the fact that the current tools, such as the CW-09 form, fail to measure parents' capacity to change their behaviour. Despite the intention of interventions like parenting programmes and rehabilitation services to assist families after reunification, no parents had participated in these programmes, or even, in some cases, in the risk and safety assessment. This hindered their cooperation with social workers. Poor communication and lack of support are fundamental flaws that indicate the need for improved communication protocols and ethical standards. It is essential that parents be involved in decision-making regarding their children. Using an ethics of care framework with an emphasis on attentiveness, responsibility, and competence could cultivate empathy and respect for parents and assist them with improving their caregiving.

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