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### Taking the child's perspective

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# Chapter 6

General discussion

This thesis aimed to shed light on children's needs and participation in the Dutch CPS. The previous chapters provided insight into the embedding of children's participation in child protection policy, professionals' views and experiences with children's participation in child protection investigations, and children's and parents' experiences and needs in a trajectory in the CPS. This leads to important implications how the CPS can best support families in line with the best interests of the child. Moreover, it shows the valuable feedback children and parents can provide, which even more underlines the importance and value of their participation in child protection research, policy and practice. In this final chapter, the main findings of these studies will be brought together and discussed. After this, we will reflect on the strengths and limitations of this dissertation and discuss the recommendations and implications for future research and child protection policy and practice.

## 6.1 Overview of main findings

As children's participation is an important prerequisite for the best interests of the child principle, we examined the embedding of children's meaningful participation in Dutch child protection policy and practice (CRC, 2013). First, we analysed documents on Dutch child protection policy (**chapter 2**), using the model of 'meaningful participation' we developed based on children's participatory right (article 12, UNCRC). By this, we aimed to answer the following research question: *(How) are the dimensions of meaningful participation of children represented in the key policy documents relevant for the current Dutch CPS?* This analysis showed that the idea of children's participation is deeply embedded in Dutch child protection policy, but that these documents do not fully cover the three dimensions of meaningful participation (informing, hearing and involving). Furthermore, it showed the differences between the guidelines used by different organizations involved in the chain of child protection; a clear, overall and uniform policy concerning children's participation in child protection is lacking.

Second, as professionals play a key role in making participation 'actually happen' in child protection *practice*, we interviewed 31 professionals conducting child protection investigations in the Netherlands (**chapter 3**), to answer the following research question: *How do professionals view and experience children's participation in child protection*

*investigations?* This study showed how professionals' views are determining children's possibilities to participate in child protection investigations and how these views are related to the context in which professionals work. Child characteristics and attitudes of parents in the direct interaction with children and parents (micro-level), supporting and challenging factors on the organizational level of their work environment (meso-level), and professionals' perceptions of their role in the overall CPS (macro-level) all influence how professionals view (the importance of) children's participation in the investigation phase of the CPS.

Besides children's participation, we examined children's and parents' experiences with a trajectory in the CPS, to get insight into their needs in this trajectory. By interviewing children and parents about their experiences, we wanted to learn how the CPS can best support them. First, we interviewed 11 children (**chapter 4**), to answer the following research question: *How do children experience a trajectory in the Dutch CPS and what are their needs during this trajectory?* This study provided insight into children's experiences with their 'journey' through a trajectory in the CPS and what they need during this process. It showed the impact (the duration of) this trajectory has on children and how children mainly relate their experiences with the CPS to their interactions and relationships with professionals. Ensuring continuity and stability in children's living circumstances as much and as soon as possible, respecting and responding to children's individual personality and needs, and enabling children's participation are essential for children to experience being cared about, and to experience some power, control and security in this overwhelming trajectory.

Second, as parents and family life play an important role in the fulfilling of children's rights, collaboration with parents in child protection and parents' experiences with and attitudes towards the system are essential in the protection of children. Therefore, we investigated parents' experiences with a trajectory in the Dutch CPS (**chapter 5**). This helped us to get insight into what families need according to parents and how the CPS can best support them. By interviewing 20 parents, we aimed to answer the following research question: *How do parents experience a trajectory in the Dutch CPS and what are their suggestions?* The results showed that the overarching theme in parents' experiences was 'It is all about the child' and that it was important for them that the involvement of the

CPS was bringing change and was serving their children's needs: 'do not let it all happen but do something', 'get a clear picture of the family's situation', and 'take parents seriously', were parents' main messages. Parents emphasize that a system providing sufficient money, time and knowledge is needed to help professionals realise these messages. Parents' trust in the system and their attitude towards it are shaped by their experiences with the aspects mentioned above.

## 6.2 Discussion of main findings

The experiences of children prior to child protection involvement as well as the trajectory and decision-making in the CPS have much impact on children (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Pöllki et al., 2012; Woolfson et al., 2010). Experiences of unsafety, insecurity and instability for a longer period of time, before and during the trajectory in the CPS, could threaten their well-being and development (Fratto, 2016; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Riebschleger et al., 2015; Strand & Sprang, 2018). Child protection intervening should play an important role in improving and optimizing children's well-being and development, in line with the best interests of the child principle (CRC, 2013).

This dissertation provides insight into children's and families' experiences with the CPS, including their needs when involved in a child protection trajectory. It shows the importance of ensuring *continuity and stability* in the life of the child as soon as possible and emphasizes the gain of a *good relationship* between professionals, children and parents (based on genuine support and partnership). Furthermore, within this relationship, ensuring *meaningful participation of children* is essential, in line with the 'best interests of the child' principle.

Children and parents mainly relate their experiences to their direct interaction with professionals. Therefore, professionals play, via their direct interaction with children and parents, an important role in meeting the needs of continuity and stability and a good relationship. However, as shown among others by the interview study with professionals, *contextual factors* on different levels play an important role as well. These levels have to support and facilitate professionals in the protection of children (Bell, 2011; Cardol, 2012; Conradi & Hossler, 2018; Wulczyn et al., 2010). The direct interaction between

professionals, children and parents takes place in an organization (organizational level), including several layers such as policy makers, managers and practitioners. Each organization is part of the CPS (overall CPS level), in which a range of organizations are responsible for the different phases of child protection. The CPS operates within the broader child welfare system and is linked with organizations of other systems (e.g., health care system and educational system), covered by the overall legislation of the Youth Act 2015.

Overall, the focus and frameworks of these different levels are influenced by cultural values and norms on the societal and governmental level. Based on the underlying values of child protection, this broad context needs to provide the facilities, material resources, skilled staff and funding needed for the protection of children (Cardol, 2012; Wulczyn et al., 2010). The cultures, organizing structures, policies, and practices are intertwined at different levels and therefore interdependent (Bell, 2011; Wulczyn et al., 2010). This implies that the timely realisation of children's needs for continuity and stability and the development of good relationships requires awareness and efforts across multiple levels of organizations (e.g., policy makers, managers, practitioners) and across the different levels of the overall CPS (e.g., the different organizations involved as well as inter-agency collaboration and overall child protection agreements and guidelines). Furthermore, this needs an integration and embedment of insights on children's needs in the larger child welfare system and its underlying governmental and societal values, principles and policies (Bell, 2011; Cardol, 2012; Conradi & Hossler, 2018; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Stephens, Gopalan, Acri, Boman, & Mckernan Mckay, 2018; Wulczyn et al., 2010).

The following sections discuss the importance of ensuring *continuity and stability* in the life of the child as much and as soon as possible, a good quality of the *relationship with professionals* and *meaningful participation* of children. We present the views of children, parents and professionals on this, including their ideas regarding the role of professionals' attitudes and supporting and challenging contextual factors for its realisation. In particular, we describe the embedding of the dimensions of children's meaningful participation in professionals' views and policy documents relevant for the Dutch CPS.

### 6.2.1 Ensuring continuity and stability

Important in children's as well as parents' experiences is whether the intervening of the child protection system is bringing positive change (see also Smithson & Gibson, 2017). Both children and parents emphasize the importance of responding *as soon as possible*, because the situation before the report to the CPS as well as the child protection trajectory both may have serious impact on children (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Juffer, 2010; Pöllki et al., 2012; Riebschleger et al., 2015; Woolfson et al., 2010). Parents share different experiences whether the CPS succeeds in responding adequately and quickly to change the harmful situation as soon as possible. The interviews with children show how the long duration of the trajectory and the long time it can take before issues important to them are arranged can lead to ongoing instability and insecurity (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). The experiences of children show the importance of: 1) continuity in contact with parents (e.g., re-establish contact as soon as possible); 2) stability in daily life activities during the child protection trajectory (e.g., considering these activities when scheduling meetings or arranging the possibility to play sports again after a divorce of parents as soon as possible); and 3) considering the importance of stability in (daily) life in child protection decision-making (e.g., considering the importance of staying at the same school in the case of an out-of-home placement). This is essential to experience a sense of safety, security and a future perspective. Discontinuity and instability for a longer period of time in the life of the child, by creating feelings of insecurity and unsafety, could (further) harm children's well-being and development (Gaskell, 2010; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Riebschleger et al., 2015; Strand & Sprang, 2018). Moreover, responding quickly to children's and parents' requests for help and needs is essential to obtain a feeling of being cared about and avoid feelings of frustration and mistrust, and thereby impacts the ability to build relationships (Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2011; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Petersen, 2018).

**Supportive and challenging factors.** Children and parents address that professionals should be truly motivated and dedicated to help and have to be decisive to act quickly. Besides this role of professionals in the direct interaction with children and parents, contextual levels need to support and facilitate professionals (Cardol, 2012; Wulczyn et al., 2010).

First, the *structure of the overall CPS*, involving a range of organizations being responsible for the different phases of the chain of child protection, seems to have consequences for bringing positive change and continuity and stability as soon as possible. Parents explain how the involvement of (too) many organizations, the high turnover of professionals, and the lack of good communication and collaboration can cause that ‘you have to start all over again’ at each agency.

Second, in line with other studies, parents feel that *time and workload* have an influence. Some children as well as parents address that working in child protection is ‘a serious and difficult task’. Children state that professionals should view this ‘as more than just their job’, and parents with mainly negative experiences express that professionals ‘are doing what they can’ but are hindered by the system. They express that professionals should be facilitated with enough money and thereby time per family to be able to do something instead of ‘letting it all happen’. Moreover, parents also explain how this workload leads to a high turnover of professionals, which in turn results in the involvement of a higher number of professionals (see for instance Colton & Roberts, 2006).

### **6.2.2 Developing a good relationship**

Professionals’ relationship and interaction with children and parents play a crucial role in children’s and parents’ experiences. The experience of being cared about by professionals, being truly willing to help them and being there for them is a very important building block for this relationship, as well as being taken seriously and feeling understood. Professionals should provide children and parents the feeling that they care about how the family is doing and that helping them is ‘more than just their job’. These relationships, already from the first stages of the CPS, are important to counteract the impact of the overwhelming involvement of the CPS (Buckley et al., 2011; Jobe & Gorin, 2013) and are essential for children’s and parents’ engagement, and thereby for protecting and supporting the child’s well-being and development (Fargion, 2014; Forrester et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2018; Van Nijnatten, 2010). Moreover, creating and maintaining partnerships with children and parents helps professionals to get insight in their unique perspectives and needs, and enables them to adequately respond to children’s and families’ needs (Buckley et al., 2011; Mason, 2008; Steenbakkens, Ellingsen, Van der Steen, & Grietens, 2018).

Below, the principles underlying taking children and parents seriously to develop collaborative, respectful relationships are discussed. Specifically regarding children's participation, we investigated the embedding of the dimensions of meaningful participation in professionals' views and child protection policy. Last, we discuss how contextual factors could challenge or support professionals in building relationships and specifically ensuring meaningful participation of children.

**Take parents seriously.** In line with other studies, this dissertation shows the relevance of professionals' interactions with parents and their attitudes towards them. Besides the study on parents' experiences showing the importance of a good relationship between professionals and parents (see also De Greef, 2019), children's experiences show that their attitudes towards professionals and the CPS are constructed by, among other, professionals' behaviour towards their parents. Respecting parents and the bond children have with them is important for children to feel respected and understood by professionals. In addition, professionals address the important role parents play in the child protection process, by explaining parents' influence on children's participation in child protection investigations. Altogether, this shows the interdependency of the professionals' interactions with parents and the relationship professionals have with children (Muench, Diaz, & Wright, 2017) and underlines the necessity of collaboration and a good relationship between professionals and parents for bringing positive change in child protection trajectories (CRC, 2013; Ghaffar et al., 2012; Strand, 2018).

However, not all parents we interviewed felt taken seriously by child protection professionals. Research shows that partnership with parents can be experienced as challenging by child protection professionals. For instance, professionals can experience parents being resistant or can observe tensions between children's and parents' interests (Fargion, 2014; Munro & Ward, 2008). Precisely this relationship between professionals and parents as well as professionals' views of parents in child protection are essential to overcome this resistance. Stephens and colleagues (2018) emphasize the importance of investment in building collaborative and respectful relationships with parents instead of easily giving up on parents by attributing failing to engage to parental resistance or lack of compliance. Starting from the view that parents may experience contact with the CPS as overwhelming and threatening, empathy, respect, transparency and good listening with

a focus on both the child's safety and the parents' well-being can tackle parents' resistance and contribute to their engagement (Forrester et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2018). Fargion (2014, p. 26) focuses on connecting child protection with family support to move towards an attitude in child protection that "an abusive parent is somebody to be helped, not just stopped". This is in line with parents' emphasis in this dissertation on the importance of being taken seriously. Parents report that professionals should be clear and honest towards them, do something with the information they share, and provide empathy and support. They underline that this is important to bring positive change, as their well-being is important for their children's well-being, and as they can provide important information, are open for help and want the best for their children. Promptly responding to requests for help by parents who are eager and open to support is essential to avoid that great potential for early intervention and parental cooperation gets lost (Petersen, 2018).

Furthermore, parents themselves explain their situation as 'complex and often stagnating' because of ongoing communication problems and allegations between them. Besides the importance of the relationship, they share other ideas on how to overcome such an impasse. They argue that ensuring concrete and clear agreements with and between parents is essential to diminish the room for discussion between parents, which in turn is needed to move forward (see also Johnston, 1994). Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of getting a clear picture of the family's situation, by determining the truth and avoiding a 'tunnel vision'. They feel that in these complex situations of counter-accusations between parents the veracity of what is being said should be checked more. They think that observations and consulting other people in the environment could help to get a clear picture of the situation.

**Take children seriously.** Professionals' attitudes towards children are influenced by their conceptualisation and understanding of 'children' and 'childhood'. According to the best interests of the child principle, professionals should acknowledge that children are unique individuals and holders of their own rights. Moreover, they should take children seriously as primary service users and experts of their own experiences, which underlines the necessity of children's participation in child protection (CRC, 2013; Lundy et al., 2011).

First, awareness of the *heterogeneity* of children in child protection is important: children emphasize the importance of a personal approach and professionals trying to 'get

to know them', 'as every child is unique' (CRC, 2013). The feeling of being cared about, taken seriously and understood requires *responsiveness and sensitiveness* for the child's individual personality, needs and wishes (CRC, 2011; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Riebschleger et al., 2015). Assessing the personal needs and wishes and adopting a personal approach is crucial in assessing the best interests of the child (CRC, 2013) and important to ensure that individual needs and strengths are not overlooked (Holland, 2009). For example, the interviews with children showed the different preferences children have regarding ways and locations of participation as well as different needs regarding interventions.

Second, taking children seriously requires acknowledging their agency and capabilities and thereby their right for *participation* (CRC, 2009; Van Nijnatten, 2010). Participation becomes meaningful when *all* children get the opportunity and *choice* to be adequately *informed* and *heard* and when their views are *involved* in the decision-making process, *continuously* during the overall child protection process (CRC, 2009). In line with these dimensions, children address in the interviews 1) the importance of clarity and honesty so that they 'know where they stand', 2) the importance of getting the opportunity to share what they want to share, and 3) the importance of, besides listening, acting upon this by arranging issues important to them. The interviews showed that participation is very important for children to give them some choice, control and power in the overwhelming child protection trajectory. Experiencing power and control over one's life is important for one's health and well-being; participation can empower vulnerable children in child protection, whereas not involving them can leave them more insecure, anxious and powerless (Leeson, 2007; Mason, 2008; Reimer, 2010). Involving children, already at the first stages of the CPS, is important to counteract negative experiences due to unclarity, confusion and stress (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Reimer, 2010). Moreover, empowerment, agency and voice are described as being essential for children's self-esteem (e.g. feeling secure in future decision-making), resilience, disclosure of their life stories and recovery from traumatic experiences (Leeson, 2007; Strand, 2018; Van Nijnatten, 2010; Van Os, Zijlstra, Post, Knorth, & Kalverboer, 2018).

**Embedding of meaningful participation.** Specifically regarding children's participation, two important building blocks to ensure meaningful participation of children in child

protection practice were investigated in this dissertation: 1) embedding in policy and legislation, and 2) professionals' views and attitudes towards participation. The overall idea and importance of children's participation in child protection practice is deeply embedded in child protection practice and acknowledged by child protection professionals. However, not all dimensions of meaningful participation get attention in policy and practice, and children's opportunities to participate seem to differ based on characteristics of children, professionals and organizations.

Regarding the dimension of *informing*, we see that policy documents as well as professionals focus mainly on informing children content wise about the child protection process (e.g. the report, investigation procedure and decision). For instance, informing children about their right to grow up free from all forms of violence is not included in Dutch child protection policy and only mentioned by some professionals. This is of great importance to place child maltreatment in the right perspective, as children could consider this as 'normal' or 'accepted practice' and feel guilty and responsible (CRC, 2009; Gezondheidsraad, 2011; Pöllki et al., 2012). Furthermore, there seems to be no consistency among professionals and organizations on informing children about the decision(-making process) at the end of the investigation. Explaining children whether and how their views are considered is an important tool for ensuring them their views are really taken into account (CRC, 2009). Openness, honesty and transparency about the decision and decision-making process are important for children to feel listened to and taken seriously (Pöllki et al., 2012; Van Bijleveld et al., 2014), even when the outcome is not what they have hoped for (Bell, 2011). Moreover, this transparency about choices and decisions is essential to ensure that children's living circumstances do not change suddenly and unexpectedly (Reimer, 2010; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006) and important to experience trust and a sense of control and safety (Strand, 2018). Regarding *hearing*, the importance of gathering the perspective of the child is emphasized in policy documents and described quite concretely by the professionals interviewed. However, in line with other studies, it is difficult for professionals to concretise whether and how to *involve* children's views in decision-making (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Kennan et al., 2018; Ten Brummelaar et al., 2018; Thomas, 2007; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015). The policy documents that we analysed do not provide clear guidelines on this.

Furthermore, meaningful participation is a *right for all children*, implying that all children should get the opportunity to participate (CRC, 2009). Our policy analysis and interview study with professionals show how the possibilities for children to participate could differ between children. First, varying *views of professionals* make that children's possibilities to participate differ depending on the professional involved. For instance, professionals vary in the way they concretise children's participation in their investigations and the age limits described used by professionals differ widely. Second, *child characteristics* play a role. We found that age limits are mentioned in policy documents and widely used by professionals, despite the CRC (2009) discouraging the use of age limits and stating that all children are capable to form and express their views. Furthermore, some professionals describe difficulties in the communication with children with intellectual disabilities, mental disorders and children who do not speak the major language. Policy documents do not provide information about the participation of children who often experience difficulties in making their views heard, although their disadvantaged position regarding possibilities to participate requires extra attention and effort in policy and practice to make participation possible for *all children* (CRC, 2009; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Further, children, especially in the context of child protection, are often viewed as vulnerable. Several studies show how experiencing tension between children's protection and participation can lead to protecting the child at the expense of participation (Heimer & Palme, 2016; Keddell, 2018). Although some professionals in our interview study viewed this vulnerability of children precisely as an important reason for participation, others questioned the participation of children because of their vulnerability.

In addition, meaningful participation is considered to be an *ongoing process*. The involvement of different professionals and organizations as discussed before has implications for children's participation throughout the chain of child protection, as this is challenging the development of relationships. Furthermore, the involvement of different organizations and a lack of an overall policy on children's participation results in varying opportunities to participate throughout the different phases of the CPS.

Another aspect of meaningful participation is that it is an obligation for the State, but a right and thereby a *choice* for children. This means that children should have the

opportunity to participate and be informed adequately, among other about their rights and possibilities to participate (CRC, 2009). Giving children choice on how to participate is important for them: the interview study with children shows that children can have different preferences in whether, how, where and with whom they want to share their story and underlines that giving children choice and control in sharing their story is a condition for them to feel safe. Lundy (2007) reports that deciding together with children on whether and how they want to participate is essential for creating a safe space. Although some professionals do address the importance of deciding together with children on putting participation into practice, policy documents do not provide guidelines on informing children about their right to participate and the possibilities to participate.

**Supportive and challenging factors.** The development of the relationship takes place on the level of the direct interaction between professional, child and parents, which underlines the important role of (the attitudes of) professionals. However, this dissertation also provides insight into the role contextual factors play in supporting professionals in the development of relationships with children and parents.

First, this dissertation shows that an *underlying culture and vision*, acknowledging the crucial role collaborative relationships with children and parents play in the protection of children, is essential to ensure the development of good relationships in child protection practice (Bell, 2011; Stephens et al., 2018). This awareness can be embedded in the views of professionals working across different levels and organizations of the CPS, as well as be incorporated in legislation and policy covering the system. The interviews with children and parents give insight into how professionals' underlying views and attitudes influence children's and parents' feelings of, for example, being taken seriously. Furthermore, the interviews with professionals and the policy analysis show how the embedding of the values and dimensions of meaningful participation in professionals' views and policy documents have implications for children's opportunities to participate in child protection practice. Professionals explain how a common vision on children's participation within the organization works encouraging for them and makes children's participation 'just obvious'.

Second, the different studies provide insight into the influence of the *structure of the overall CPS*, involving different organizations being responsible for the different

phases of child protection, on the development of good relationships between professionals, children and parents. Children and parents mention that many professionals and organizations are involved in the child protection trajectory, and that this can be overwhelming and confusing (see also Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Studsrød et al., 2014). The involvement of multiple organizations and professionals challenges the development of good relationships; consistent relationships support the development of trust and experience that professionals are engaged to help (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). For instance, short-term interactions could complicate to get to know the child and the family and thereby to adapt a personal approach and respond to their individual needs. Professionals explain how their short involvement together with the involvement of many other professionals can make them question the added value and burden of involving children in child protection investigations. This could hinder the development of good relationships at the start of a child protection trajectory, despite that this is of most importance as the time after the referral is often experienced as confusing and overwhelming (Buckley et al., 2011; Jobe & Gorin, 2013). Moreover, Jobe and Gorin (2013) state that it can be difficult and overwhelming when children have to repeat their story to a stream of social workers. Although this is also shared by some children in our study (for instance, by emphasizing that they would have preferred to write a letter after several conversations), this dissertation also shows that children can have positive experiences with professionals who were only involved shortly. This underlines that also ‘just passers-by’ can make a difference in the lives of children.

Third, practical resources including *time and workload* have an influence on professionals’ possibilities to build relationships with children and parents in daily child protection practice. The development of good relationships requires much time and effort of professionals. For instance, being available, being accessible, and having regular contacts are essential (Gaskell, 2010; Jobe & Gorin, 2013). Time pressure and heavy workload were important themes both in parents’ and professionals’ interviews. For some professionals, a lack of time forms a barrier to involving children in child protection investigations. Workloads and a focus on meeting targets do not provide the time needed for developing collaborative relationships (Buckley et al., 2011; Stephens et al., 2018).

### 6.3 Methodological reflections

In this section, we discuss the strengths and limitations of the focus and scope of this dissertation, and its contextual embedding.

#### 6.3.1 Focus and scope

The broad scope of this dissertation makes that children's needs and participation are examined for the different phases of the chain of child protection and for the overall CPS, as well as from different perspectives (children, parents and professionals) and on different levels (policy and practice). Furthermore, this dissertation does not focus only on one specific type of child protection intervention but includes different child protection trajectories.

First, by interviewing children and parents about their experiences with the trajectory in the CPS and not limiting this to one phase of the chain of child protection, we got insight into their 'journey' through the CPS. It is interesting to see how a child protection trajectory can be divided in different phases in child protection research and policy (with different organizations and professionals responsible for the different phases), but how children and parents are not always distinguishing the different phases explicitly, and how many experiences are linked to the 'journey' throughout the whole chain of child protection.

Besides these interviews, the policy analysis focused on the overall chain of child protection. Studying the policy documents covering the different phases of the CPS gave insight into differences regarding guidelines for children's participation and how a uniform, overall policy is lacking. However, the interviews with professionals only covered the investigation phase. Although it would have been interesting to get insight into professionals' views and experiences with children's participation in other phases of the chain of child protection as well, this chapter (chapter three) also shows the impact of the structure of the overall CPS on professionals' ideas about children's participation in the different phases. Moreover, by focusing on the investigation phase, children's participation at the start of the chain of child protection was studied. Meaningful participation and the development of good relationships 'from the start' is important, as children often experience this phase as overwhelming and confusing and as first

experiences with participation determine their beliefs about future participatory practices (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Van Bijleveld et al., 2014).

Second, regarding the interview studies on children's and parents' experiences and needs, the open nature of the research questions (and thereby the open nature of the data collection and analysis) gave them room to share what was important according to them. This provided in-depth insight into their experiences and needs. Children's and parents' experiences with the CPS were mixed, including negative as well as positive experiences. Besides that this makes that the advice and needs of children and parents are based on positive as well as negative experiences, it is interesting that both groups address much the same needs and advice, despite their different experiences and the heterogeneity in our samples (e.g. age, gender, reason of child protection involvement and child protection trajectories and interventions).

Third, the combination of different perspectives and levels in this dissertation provides innovative insights. Regarding children's participation, the combination of studying policy documents as well as professionals' views and experiences is of added value, as these two important building blocks for children's participation are intertwined (Bell, 2011). In addition, the combination of the different perspectives of children, parents and professionals gives important insights. For instance, this shows the importance of the relationship between professionals, children and parents and how professionals' relationships with parents are intertwined with their relationships with children. Furthermore, professionals' doubts regarding whether participation is really beneficial for children, from their perspective as investigator and 'only a passer-by', is interesting in combination with the positive experiences of some children with professionals who were only involved shortly. This shows the uniqueness of children's perspectives and perceptions and stresses the importance of bringing in children's perspectives in research.

### **6.3.2 Importance of context**

The contextual embedding of this dissertation (the Dutch CPS) as well as the context of the participants involved are important when discussing the generalizability and 'completeness' of the findings presented in this dissertation.

First, the three samples that were studied in this dissertation are heterogeneous (e.g., variation in the period of time working at the child protection agency for professionals, and different child protection trajectories and interventions for families). However, although we did not aim for a representative sample in these episodic narrative interview studies, the samples of children, parents and professionals (based on self-selection and having a low response rate of children and parents) were small and convenient samples, which forms a limitation for the generalizability of the findings of our studies to the population of children and parents in the CPS, as well as to the population of professionals serving these children and families.

Second, we lack information on background characteristics of children and parents. As we wanted them to feel comfortable during the interview and as free as possible in what they wanted to share with us, we did not ask explicitly for background information such as educational level, socio-economical background, migration background and reasons of child protection involvement. Besides this, we decided to describe the samples in general terms only, to make children's and parents' stories not traceable. This approach limited our information on the background of our participants (in particular children and parents).

Third, regarding the focus of this dissertation, most studies on child protection and children's participation are conducted in Western countries, as is this dissertation. Due to varying cultural values regarding, for instance, 'good quality' of child-rearing or differing views of 'the child' in individualistic and collectivistic societies, several interpretations and views exist regarding the best interests of the child principle and children's participation worldwide (Bell, 2011; Zevulun, Post, Zijlstra, Kalverboer, & Knorth, 2019). Therefore, the 'Western perspective' on children's needs and participation as presented in this dissertation requires careful interpretation, among other regarding its generalizability of the model of meaningful participation as well as the other results of this dissertation. Moreover, perspectives on for example children's participation from other cultures and countries could have added other, valuable insights to further deepen and enrich the concept of 'meaningful participation' (see e.g. Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

## 6.4 Recommendations and implications

This dissertation offers recommendations for research and practice. In this section, first the future perspectives for research will be discussed. Second, recommendations and future perspectives for child protection practice and policy will be presented.

### 6.4.1 Research

This dissertation shows the role *the structure of the overall CPS* (involving different organizations being responsible for the different phases of child protection) plays in children's and parents' experiences, as well as in professionals' views regarding children's participation. To get more insight into the role the structure of the overall CPS plays in meeting children's and families' needs, this could be an important focus for future research. For instance, a longitudinal study following children and parents during and throughout their trajectory in the CPS could provide relevant insights for child protection research as well as practice. First, insight into their experiences with the development of relationships with professionals throughout the different phases of the CPS could provide interesting insights in the importance of the *relationship* between professionals, children and parents. Second, following families in these trajectories could provide relevant insights into the collaboration between different organizations, with regard to ensuring *continuity and stability* for children as much and as soon as possible.

Concerning children's *participation*, investigating the *views of professionals* involved in other phases of the chain of child protection is valuable to get insight into their perspectives and their different roles. Furthermore, following children throughout the chain of child protection in a longitudinal study could bring more insight into their *actual participation* (see also Sinclair, 2018) throughout the chain of child protection.

Another aspect to further investigate is the *meaningful participation of specific groups of children*. The participation of, among other, younger children, children with physical and/or mental disabilities, children with severe mental disorders or children who do not speak the major language, deserves more attention in research, policy and practice. Specific attention to possibilities for them to participate in the CPS is in line with article 2 of the UNRC (CRC, 2009). Future research could contribute to this, for instance by

investigating their current possibilities to participate in child protection practice and their needs regarding participation.

Furthermore, investigating the *gatekeeping role of adults* in children's participation is needed. Child protection researchers are mainly dependent on professionals and parents when recruiting children. Concerns of so-called 'gatekeepers' to protect the well-being of vulnerable children can exclude them from participation and disempower them (Horgan, 2017; Leeson, 2007). This makes that the most vulnerable children are possibly not reached and that children cannot always make their own choice to participate, which is not in line with children's participatory rights (CRC, 2009). Further research on the complexity of children's involvement in research with regard to the gatekeeping role of adults is important so that *all* children get the opportunity to participate and children can decide themselves on their participation in research.

Finally, besides studying topics not covered in this dissertation, it is interesting to learn about children's participation, partnership with parents, and children's needs in *different countries and cultures*. As said, cultural values influence views on childhood and child protection; insight into the participation, partnerships and needs of children from other cultural perspectives could provide interesting knowledge for Western countries (Henrich et al., 2010).

#### **6.4.2 Practice and policy**

The CPS has the responsibility to protect and support children's well-being and development, in line with the best interests of the child principle (CRC, 2013; Strand & Sprang, 2018). Knowledge about children's and families' experiences and needs provides insight into important building blocks for a child-friendly CPS, designed with children's needs and perspectives at the forefront (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). First, recommendations for child protection policy and practice lie in ensuring *continuity and stability* in children's lives as soon as possible. Second, recommendations can be made regarding the necessity of developing a *good relationship* between professionals, children and parents for the protection of children's well-being and development.

On the professional level, realising these two aspects requires a collaborative, respectful relationship with children and parents in which professionals listen to and act adequately and quickly upon what is important to the individual child and family involved (Gaskell, 2010; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Petersen, 2018; Pöllki et al., 2012; Studsrød et al., 2014). Awareness in the CPS of this vital role of professionals is essential, as well as that also ‘just passers-by’ can despite their short involvement make a difference in children’s and families’ lives. However, the context professionals are working in plays an important role in supporting and facilitating professionals (Bell, 2011; Cardol, 2012; Conradi & Hossler, 2018; Wulczyn et al., 2010). Knowledge and awareness on the different levels of child protection about children’s perceptions and needs may ensure that the CPS is designed with children’s perceptions and needs at the forefront. This can support and facilitate professionals to meet these needs in daily child protection practice, and ensure that, for example, children’s possibilities to meaningful participation are not dependent on the effort and views of the individual professional but possible for all children entering the CPS, independently of the professional who is involved (Cardol, 2012; Wulczyn et al., 2010). Concrete recommendations regarding how the overall culture and vision, the structure of the overall CPS, and practical resources can ensure a child-friendly CPS with children’s perceptions and needs at the forefront will be discussed below. As indicated before, the different levels of child protection are intertwined (Bell, 2011; Wulczyn et al., 2010); therefore, these recommendations are applicable for all levels.

**Centrality of children’s needs.** An underlying culture and vision, with children’s needs as the starting point for the design of the CPS, has to ensure that all professionals on all levels of the CPS use these principles in their work with families. Furthermore, when designing child protection starting from these principles, this is to ensure that professionals are practically facilitated to meet children’s needs (Bell, 2011; Stephens et al., 2018).

First, attention to the importance of ensuring *continuity and stability* in the lives of children as soon as possible should be incorporated in the culture and vision of all different levels of the CPS. It is essential that professionals are aware of the impact of involvement in child protection, as well as of the duration of trajectories and decisions made on children’s sense of safety and security, and thereby on their well-being and development. As children’s time perceptions differ from adults’ and as long processes and

procedures can have negative consequences for children's development, quick decision-making and short trajectories are needed in the best interests of the child (CRC, 2013; Gaskell, 2010; Juffer, 2010; Kalverboer & Zijlstra, 2006; Strand & Sprang, 2018).

Second, the underlying culture and vision of the CPS needs to acknowledge the crucial role a collaborative and respectful *relationship* with children and parents plays for the protection of children's well-being and development. Professionals' conceptualisation of parents and children in child protection is significant in this context. Regarding parents, for instance, failures of parental engagement should not be attributed to parental resistance too easily, but be viewed as asking for extra effort and time investment to build a collaborative relationship (De Greef, 2019; Fargion, 2014; Stephens et al., 2018). This study showed that parents are aware of the complexity of child protection intervening; discussing this complexity could possibly provide professionals with important insights on how to overcome this (e.g., clear and concrete agreements with and between parents). Regarding children, we encourage to challenge adults' assumptions about, for instance, the need to protect children against the 'burden' of participation because of children's vulnerability. Children's capabilities to form and express their own views should be acknowledged (Leeson, 2007). Furthermore, awareness about the uniqueness of every child is important for recognising children's individual needs and strengths (CRC, 2013; Holland, 2009). The view that children and parents in child protection are competent, unique individuals and crucial to collaborate should be the starting point in professionals' interactions with them.

Moreover, specifically regarding children's participation, a vision acknowledging *all values and dimensions of meaningful participation* is essential. Raising awareness about what meaningful participation actually includes needs to ensure that *all* children *always* get the opportunity to meaningful participation, irrespectively of characteristics of children, professionals or organizations (CRC, 2009). First, it is important that there is awareness of *all dimensions* of meaningful participation (for instance, about informing children about their rights to grow up without violence, to informing children about the decision and how their views were considered, and to developing clear guidelines on how to involve them in decision-making). Second, ensuring that *all* children get the opportunity to form and express their views needs extra efforts.

Child characteristics such as the vulnerability of children in child protection, a younger age, physical and/or mental disabilities, mental disorders and not speaking the major language could not be a reason to *not* involve children. This requires extra attention to acknowledging children's capabilities to form and express their views and to develop child-friendly communication skills in professionals. Further, more attention to the importance of participation of these specific groups of children is needed (Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017). Third, professionals need to be aware of how they can give children a *choice* to participate, as they may have differing preferences (Lundy, 2007). Providing children choice in whether and how they want to participate could also give them some choice and control regarding the involvement of different organizations and professionals throughout the chain of child protection (for instance, by following children's preferences regarding specific professionals to talk with or their varying preferences throughout the different phases of the CPS).

**Facilitating professionals.** It is essential to consider whether the development of professionals' relationships with children and parents and their ability to ensure continuity and stability as soon as possible are optimally facilitated by the CPS. To achieve these goals, certain material resources are needed and working conditions have to be met (Cardol, 2012; Wulczyn et al., 2010).

First, there is the level of the overall organization and *structure of the CPS*. Children 'travel' through the chain of child protection, meeting different organizations and professionals on their 'journey' (Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Studsrød et al., 2014). This structure of the CPS requires close collaboration, clarity about professionals' roles and tasks, and clear overall agreements and policy, to avoid that families have 'to start all over again' at every agency and to ensure clarity regarding children's and parents' contacts with professionals (Boelhouwer, Aukens & Loykens, 2019). For instance, clear guidelines about children's participation throughout the CPS and agreements among professionals are needed to ensure participation as an ongoing process.

Moreover, it should be considered how the involvement of different professionals and organizations impacts children and challenges professionals in meeting children's

needs. First, it is important to question whether the current structure of the CPS sufficiently avoids that harmful situations leading to the child protection involvement as well as discontinuity and instability during the trajectory can exist unnecessarily long. The referrals between organizations imply the involvement of new professionals who need to get to know the family and the family's situation. This costs time. Moreover, short-term relationships and interactions with children and parents seem to complicate the building of trust relationships and getting insight into and responding to children's individual needs. It is necessary to consider how the structure of the overall CPS could facilitate professionals optimally to develop good relationships with children from the start of the child protection trajectory (Jobe & Gorin, 2013). Furthermore, when looking specifically at children's participation, the involvement of different organizations and professionals challenges its facilitation.

Second, besides the structure of the overall CPS, providing *sufficient resources* within organizations (and the overall CPS) is important to facilitate and support professionals in developing good relationships, implementing meaningful participation, and ensuring continuity and stability for children at the earliest (Wulczyn et al., 2010). First of all, providing professionals with sufficient time is essential to enable them to meet children's needs. Furthermore, the availability of adequate training and education is important to ensure that the overall culture and vision is incorporated in professionals' daily interactions with children and families, but also to provide professionals with concrete tools and guidelines for the communication and collaboration with children and parents. At last, practical resources such as the availability of a car for home visits and a child-friendly room at the child protection agency facilitate the relationships between professionals, children and parents; it is key here to listen to professionals' needs (Bell, 2011; Križ & Roundtree-Swain, 2017; Morris et al., 2013; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015; Wulczyn et al., 2010).

## 6.5 Conclusion

To conclude, it is essential to consider that the child's perception should always be the starting point in the protection of children. Children's perceptions can differ from adults' views and intentions. For instance, children's time perceptions differ from adults' (CRC, 2013) and children and professionals can have different experiences whether children have been listened to (Bell, 2011). Furthermore, perceptions from children in child protection could differ from the perspectives of children who are not involved in child protection. For children in child protection, who could for example have less trust in adults, it can be extra important that professionals make the child aware that they care about how the child is feeling, and that they are really motivated and dedicated to help (Van Gemert, 2019). Moreover, it is necessary to realise that every child has their own unique perceptions, views and experiences. This all together underlines that it is essential to *dialogue* with children about what is important to them and to check continuously whether, despite the best intentions of the professional, they *experience* that their needs are truly met.