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Author(s): Moilanen, Johanna; Lehto-Lundén, Tiina; Jägervi, Lotta; Kiili, Johanna; Svensson, Kerstin; Svenlin, Anu-Riina

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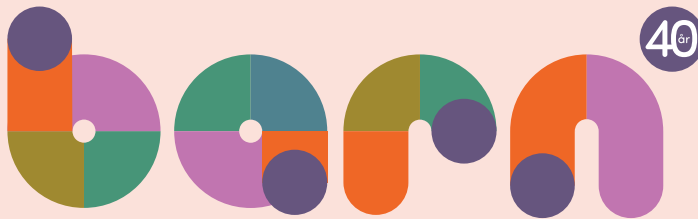
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Being, Becoming and Belonging in Constructing Children's Lived Citizenship with Contact Persons and Contact Families

Johanna Moilanen

University of Jyväskylä, Finland
E-mail: johanna.s.moilanen@jyu.fi

Tiina Lehto-Lundén

Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Finland
E-mail: tiina.lehto-lunden@metropolia.fi

Lotta Jägervi

Lund University, Sweden
E-mail: lotta.jagervi@soch.lu.se

Johanna Kiili

University of Jyväskylä, Finland
E-mail: johanna.j.kiili@jyu.fi

Kerstin Svensson

Lund University, Sweden
E-mail: kerstin.svensson@soch.lu.se

Anu-Riina Svenlin

Umeå University, Sweden
E-mail: anu-riina.svenlin@umu.se

Abstract

The article discusses children's citizenship by linking the dimensions of being, becoming and belonging to the concept of lived citizenship in the context of contact person and contact family interventions. Drawing on empirical research from Finland and Sweden, the article elaborates on how to identify if, and if so, how, children's lived citizenship is constructed in contact person and contact family interventions and to what extent these constructions

leave room for children's perspectives. The results of the study indicate that contact person and contact family interventions contribute to the construction of children's citizenship in various ways that include the perspectives on children and childhood of being, becoming and belonging. However, children's active participation often seems to be governed by adults. Thus, giving greater attention to children's intergenerational connections, i.e., adults' roles in forming children's citizenship, is needed.

Keywords: *children, lived citizenship, contact persons, contact families, social work*

Introduction

Child welfare services in the Nordic countries have a tradition of promoting the well-being of children and families through outreach interventions (e.g., Pösö et al., 2014; Sjöblom & Wiklund, 2019) delivered as lay support provided by volunteer contact persons and contact families for children and their parents. The overall aim is to strengthen the social inclusion of children and families by reinforcing their social networks (e.g., Moilanen, 2015; Statens offentliga utredningar, 2020, p. 47; Svenlin, 2020). In practice, the use of contact persons and contact families, which has been described as “an all-inclusive intervention and concept” (Franséhn, 2015, p. 109), are flexible solutions in a wide variety of situations, as they can be tailored to individual children's needs.

Although contact persons and contact families are well-established in public child welfare services, they have remained in the background and received very little attention from policy makers and researchers. In the Nordic countries, only a few studies exist on children's experiences of contact persons and contact families (Berg Eklundh, 2010; Larsen, 2011; Lehto-Lundén, 2020; Steenstrup, 2002; Svenlin, 2020). The perceived invisibility of children observed in these studies prompted this joint effort to explore children's citizenship in contact person and contact family interventions in social work with children and families.

Children and childhood have often been discussed in terms of being, becoming and belonging (e.g., James, 2011; Peers, 2018). As ontological dimensions of childhood (Peers, 2018), they involve children's perspectives, which entail regarding children as individual subjects and allowing their participation in activities that directly concern them, as well as acknowledging their sense of belonging and their capacities. Moreover, childhood is not “a ‘stand-alone’ identification or state of being” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 80–81) but is socially constructed, and hence the relationality and interdependence of children's lives must be recognised (Spyrou, 2019). Jenkins (2008, p. 17) connects the concept of identity to the processes of “being” and “becoming,” as our identities develop and are socially constructed in a reflexive and ongoing process. In fact, belonging can be seen as a necessary condition for both identity and agency (being), as well as for learning and development (becoming) (Robinson, 2017). Therefore, it is important to recognise whether the child is considered as a subject here and now or as a developing object who will become an adult.

This article discusses children's citizenship by linking the dimensions of being, becoming and belonging to the concept of lived citizenship (Cockburn, 2017; Lister, 2007a, 2007b;

Warming, 2018; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). In a similar vein, Wood (2022) sees youth citizenship as shaped through the intersection of becoming, being and doing. Our assumption is that contact persons and contact families play a role in constructing children's lived citizenship, i.e., when citizenship is framed as subjective experiences received and enacted in various daily contexts (e.g., Lister, 2007a, 2007b). Larkins (2014) states that instead of comparing children to dominant models of citizenship, scholars should focus on children's everyday practices and interpretations of these. Thus, understandings of children's citizenship are limited if they are excluded from research on the topic. Using our own research data from children, their parents, contact persons and families, and professionals, we elaborate on how to identify if, and if so, how, children's lived citizenship is constructed in contact person and contact family interventions, and to what extent these constructions leave room for children's perspectives. The emphasis is on both how lived citizenship is actualised in children's speech and how adults argue for the child's best interests.

Theorising children's citizenship

Reflecting the classical conceptualisations provided by T. H. Marshall (1950/1992), children's citizenship has, largely because their full legal or political citizenship remains unrecognised, traditionally been defined as a becoming status. Furthermore, children are described as becoming citizens, implying that they are future or learning-to-be citizens instead of here-and-now citizens (Liebel, 2020; Lister, 2007a). However, claims about children's citizenship have long featured in social science discussions (e.g., Invernizzi & Williams, 2008; Lister, 2007a, 2007b; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Roche, 1999), and children's citizenship has been described as a "slowly filling theoretical lacuna" (Lister, 2007a). Despite this, Cockburn and Devine (2020) point out that, in social work, understanding of children's citizenship has received little analytical attention.

Cockburn and Devine (2020, p. 2136) place children's citizenship in "generational and lived contexts, shaped by governmental structures and narratives of (mis)recognition." They depict children's citizenship as generationally shaped and draw attention to the relational dimensions of citizenship, particularly intergenerational relations (see also Larkins, 2014; Warming, 2018). This entails attending to the relational dimension of citizenship. Without denying the possibilities of individual citizenship, relational citizenship can be understood, citing Pols (2016), as moving citizenship "away from the relationship between individual and state toward the relationship between citizens and the way they shape social spaces." In this sense, citizenship is constructed and shaped through individuals' local daily activities and relationships and *lived* together with others (Kallio et al., 2020; see also Larkins, 2014; Liebel, 2020; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Warming, 2018).

The concept of *lived citizenship* has been used in discussions on children's citizenship (e.g., Cockburn, 2017; Lister, 2007a, 2007b; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Warming, 2018). It is based on an understanding of citizenship as essentially inclusive and more process-like than merely a state or achieved status. The concept emerged from a critique of Marshall's (1950/1992) theory of social citizenship (which connects social rights to the nation state),

and provides a difference-centred alternative view of it (Isin & Turner, 2007; Lister, 2007a, 2007b; Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). Influenced by the work of Ruth Lister (e.g., 2007a, 2007b), the concept defines citizenship as subjective experiences received and enacted in various daily contexts, particularly in the domestic, informal and private spheres. However, the concept of lived citizenship does not diminish the importance of legal status and rights granted by the state, as citizenship can be understood as both a status and a practice (Isin & Turner, 2007; Kallio et al., 2020; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017).

Other concepts of citizenship also emphasise its process-like nature. *Citizenship from below* refers to marginal social groups located on the periphery of formal and legally established citizenship (Liebel, 2020). Rather than settle for a state-centred and nationally limited understanding of citizenship, it takes various forms of everyday actions that may appeal to rights and be realised collectively “through an awareness of common interests among the acting children,” such as in children’s protest movements (Liebel, 2020, p. 207). *Acts of citizenship*, in turn, contest pre-given rights and obligations, altering established practices or orders and creating new possibilities. Such acts can be political, ethical, cultural, sexual or social – that is, they allow for various ways of being that are political (Isin & Nielsen, 2008). They aim to contest the norms that constitute citizenship by transcending the given boundaries of citizenship through disputing balances of rights, responsibilities and status (Isin, 2008, p. 37; Larkins, 2014, p. 18).

Here, we define lived citizenship as both a status and a practice (Isin & Turner, 2007; Kallio et al., 2020; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). According to Lister (2007a, p. 8), lived citizenship consists of “how people understand and negotiate rights and responsibilities, belonging and participation and the meaning that citizenship actually has in people’s lives and the ways in which people’s social and cultural backgrounds and material circumstances affect their lives as citizens” (see also Hall & Williamson, 1999). Such an understanding is based on a dynamic, process-oriented understanding of rights (Liebel, 2020, p. 199) and defines belonging and participation along with legal rights as the main attributes of lived citizenship (Artero & Ambrosini, 2022; Lister, 2007a). In child welfare and social services, the importance of children’s right to participate is widely recognised. Several scholars have analysed children’s participation in social work practices (e.g., Seim & Slettebø, 2017; Van Bijleveld et al., 2015), and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), especially Article 12, has served as a key reference point for many researchers (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019). However, as Liebel (2020) reminds us, children’s social citizenship is not covered solely by the so-called participation rights declared by the UN. Moreover, although multiple interpretations of both the concept of child participation and of Article 12 of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) regarding children’s voices exist, several are superficial or unclear and therefore tricky to apply in practice (Duramy & Gal, 2020; Kiili & Moilanen, 2019).

Our understanding of children’s lived citizenship and their social rights rests on the idea that the present family-oriented social service model should be developed in a child-centred direction, where the child is the primary service user (client) (Heimer et al.,

2018; Svenlin & Lehto-Lundén, 2023). This means that, along with their legal rights, children's social rights of belonging and participation are the main attributes of lived citizenship (Artero & Ambrosini, 2022; Lister, 2007a). This means analysing how adults (professionals, volunteers, parents) collaborate to support children, i.e., how the contact person and contact family intervention is resourced (provision) and how it supports the participation and well-being of children independently of their family of origin (see also Henry, 2020, p. 169–170). Such an understanding informs our exploration of children's lived citizenship in the context of contact person and contact family interventions.

Background, data and method

In both Finland and Sweden, the rationale for using contact persons and contact families¹ is to support children and families. This implies the formation of an interpersonal relationship between the child and contact person or contact family. During this process, contact persons and families and their support activities are supervised by municipal social workers or other professionals. The social worker's main duty is to monitor the practice and rights of children and parents (Moilanen et al., 2014; Svensson & Jägervi, 2020). In Finland, child welfare services may be provided by the wellbeing services counties,² the private sector or a non-profit organisation. The current Child Welfare Act (2007, 36 §) stipulates that the public sector body responsible for social services “must, wherever necessary, arrange a contact person or contact family for a child deemed to be in need of support.” In Sweden, the Social Services Act (2001, ch. 6 b §), states that municipal social services are responsible for assessing the needs of the child and the family, and implementing the intervention by engaging volunteers as contact persons or families.

The voluntary work of contact persons and families can be regarded as a form of civic activity based on a “contract” between the volunteer contact person or family and the child with her/his parents (Moilanen et al., 2014). However, contact persons and families also operate in public child welfare services and in co-operation with social workers and possibly other professionals. Involving “ordinary citizens” as volunteers means the establishment of new social spaces (Clarke, 2010). Thus, the location and operation of volunteers in a “semi-public” sphere formed by both domestic/informal/private and public/formal actors challenges the public–private dichotomy and muddies the boundaries between state and society (cf. Lister, 2007a, 2007b). Social bonds between children and their contact persons or contact families extend beyond the private sphere and can be characterised as

1 In Finnish, contact person translates as “support person” and contact family as “support family” (Moilanen et al., 2014). Here, we use the terms “contact person” and “contact family” to refer to similar practices in Sweden and Finland.

2 In Finland, the responsibility for organising healthcare, social welfare and rescue services was transferred from municipalities and joint municipal authorities to wellbeing services counties on 1 January 2023. This is regarded as one of the most significant administrative reforms in Finnish history. See <https://stm.fi/en/wellbeing-services-counties>

“public friendship”, as distinct from friendship, which traditionally refers to private and individual relationships (Kleres, 2009).

This article draws on empirical research from Finland and Sweden. We use data from both countries to show how children's lived citizenship is constructed through similar practices in these two Nordic countries. The joint examination of different datasets with their multiple perspectives offers a broad and varied empirical starting point for illuminating children's lived citizenship.

The Finnish data were collected during spring 2021 and summer 2022 in connection with the research project SUSU³ (see Kiili et al., 2022). The Human Sciences Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä approved the project. In 2021, ten workshops involving 19 children aged 8–17 who had a contact person or contact family were arranged, eight in three different municipalities and two via Microsoft Teams. The primary question addressed in the workshops was, “What issues should professionals ask children about when evaluating supportive relationships?” The children were also asked to reflect on their own supportive relationships and priorities (e.g., “What is your contact person/family like?” “What do you do with them?”). The aim of the workshops was to involve children in co-developing a tool for use by professionals in evaluating contact persons and family interventions. All the dialogue in the workshops was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

In the Finnish research project, intervention follow-up meetings involving children, their parents, contact persons or parents in contact families and responding social workers or other professionals were also utilised. One focus of these meetings concerned the use of the assessment tool in practice. Data comprising 19 follow-up meetings, nine of which involved contact persons and 10 of which involved contact families, were gathered during February–June 2022. In total, 19 children aged 4–16 participated in the meetings, as two pairs of siblings shared the same contact family, and in two meetings, the child was not present. Only two of these children had also attended the workshops. Thus, 36 children were informants in the Finnish data. The researchers attended the meetings and made fieldwork notes on their observations. The notes were digitally recorded and anonymised.

The Swedish data were collected for the research project KoPKoF⁴ from a pilot study conducted between 2019 and 2020, and from an ongoing case study which started in 2022. The project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Lund University). The pilot study data, comprised of 7 individual interviews with social workers, focused on how the intervention contact person is defined and understood by social services professionals (Svensson & Jägervi, 2020). The case study data consisted of four individual interviews with the child, parent, contact person and social worker involved in one case and focused on how these actors perceived the intervention and its purpose (Svensson et al., 2021). However, the child perspective is also present in the conversation of adults involved in the

3 Supporting the child – support person and support family practice in child and family social work.

4 *KontaktPersoner, KontaktFamiljer*, in Swedish, which means “Contact Persons, Contact Families.”

same case, and hence we can hear both the child's and the adults' views on the child's best interests. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Both projects were approved by local authorities and all participants, i.e., children, parents and professionals, gave their informed consent. Research encounters, especially with children, must be based on ethically sustainable interaction (Kiili & Moilanen, 2019). Thus, in line with the universal ethical imperative in all research activities with humans (World Medical Association, 1964), the voluntariness of the process was key. All the SUSU and KoPKoF participants could withdraw or decline to participate in some of the activities.⁵

Differences between separate research project datasets may present analytical challenges but also widen perspectives and provide a more robust basis for analytical argumentation. Hence, we decided to consider the datasets as one entity. Moreover, despite their differences, both illustrate the child's position in an intervention from multiple perspectives. Although the Finnish workshop dataset was collected exclusively from children, it also contained adult voices from the parents, social workers, contact persons and contact families included in the follow-up meetings. The latter data, as in the Swedish case study, pertain to concrete social work cases. The study focuses on a similar phenomenon, i.e., an intervention used in both countries. Instead of cross-country comparison and generalisations, we see the different datasets representing the views of both children and adults (see also Wood, 2022) as enriching the empirical illustration of children's lived citizenship.

Theoretically informed thematical analysis was applied to the data (Clarke et al., 2015). The emphasis was not on the individual actor group but on how lived citizenship is actualised in children's speech and how adults argue for the child's best interests. The concept of lived citizenship and the dimensions of being, becoming and belonging were the analytical lenses used in reviewing the data. The main themes were generated using a modified version of the lived citizenship framework developed by Lister (2007, a, b) and further condensed into: 1) the social, cultural and material circumstances that affect children's lives, children's participation and belonging, and rights and responsibilities; and 2) how these are understood in contact person and contact family intervention contexts. First, episodes containing speech or notes about the main themes were extracted from all datasets. Next, the Finnish and Swedish research teams conducted separate analyses and thereafter jointly discussed their preliminary analyses via an online meeting. After the joint reflection, the main themes were reviewed in terms of being, becoming and belonging. Finally, the research groups again critically reflected on the analyses together. Our analysis of children's constructions of their lived citizenship was enriched by our use of a multi-voiced approach, i.e., the availability of datasets representing multiple perspectives. This approach supported our theoretical framework in which children's citizenship is seen as constructed

5 In SUSU, the children were considered as having unique everyday knowledge of importance to research and having equal importance to the adults, both as informants and as social actors (see also Thomas, 2021). The single child in the KoPKoF case study also re-confirmed her consent after reading all quotes and their analysis pertaining to her case in the article manuscript, and she had the opportunity to discuss in the interview anything she found difficult to understand.

and shaped through relationships and lived together with others (Kallio et al., 2020; Pols, 2016; see also Larkins, 2014; Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

Findings

Resources for being, becoming and belonging

The child's need for a contact person or a contact family as a friend, significant other or part of a social network, was strongly present in our data. A contact person or contact family was seen by both children and adults as a new social resource that strengthens one's social network. In our data, having a common hobby or interest was seen as an asset that can enhance the chances of building a relationship and of the child blending naturally into the contact person's or family's social network. Thus, shared interests may promote belonging, including in situations aimed at the child's development towards becoming something.

Lived citizenship also resonates with active doing and related resources, connecting citizenship to the child's social, material and cultural circumstances, such as when professionals set contact persons the task of finding "age-appropriate activities outside the home environment" (social care worker, Finland). "Age-appropriate" aims are especially important when a child lacks friends or hobbies, or if the child's family has financial difficulties. Active doing provides the child with new resources, such as "undivided attention" from the contact person or contact family, as social workers and other professionals expressed it in several follow-up meetings in Finland. Young people especially value having the opportunity to talk to someone: "The most important thing is that I have someone to talk to" (girl aged 15, Finland). Contact persons and families can also provide the child with new cultural and social experiences, e.g., trips to movies, museums, exhibitions, sports venues or amusement parks, thereby also indirectly contributing material resources the child would otherwise lack: "We are poor, we don't have the means to provide anything extra for our child. The contact family brings variety into the child's life" (parent, Finland).

We see providing the child with new social, material and cultural resources as furthering the aim of equipping children to live their citizenship, both in their being here-and-now and as citizens-to-be (see also Bonnesen, 2020, p. 3). Providing new social resources in the form of a contact person or contact family can foster the development of a child's sense of belonging to relational networks and social communities. New material and cultural resources are also socially mediated by contact persons and families rather than directly provided by them. However, professionals should critically reflect on the social value children attribute to different resource types (Bonnesen, 2020), because if activities related to general education, such as visiting museums, are not enjoyable as lived experiences, they are not a real asset for the child either.

Being and participation

The central issue for children's lived citizenship is their position when planning shared activities with their contact persons or families. The latter may consider it their responsibility to take the child's interests and perspectives into account when making suggestions for

the child's activities. However, our data indicate that children rarely take an active role in planning or suggesting activities. While children and their best interests play a central role in supportive relationships, their participation in planning shared activities is mostly limited to saying yes or no. This implies that the dimension of being in lived citizenship, with its emphasis on understanding and negotiating rights and responsibilities (Lister, 2007a, 2007b), is adult-led.

Most often, it's [the contact person] who comes up with ideas and suggestions and most often I'm in and think it seems like fun. She has a lot of good ideas.
(Girl aged 14, Sweden)

Well, I try to pick up on what she likes. And that would be animals, she likes flowers [...] So then I try to make use of that, and so we went into the forest, and now recently we were by the lake. (Contact person in the same case as above, Sweden)

Another matter obviously related to children's rights and responsibilities as citizens is whether the child perceives the contact person or family positively or negatively. As the following citation suggests, appointing a contact person and meeting her or him may feel like an obligation imposed by adults on the child: "Is this contact person more like a friend or is it an obligation, that it's like that yes, I can see her soon or damn, I have to see her again" (girl aged 17, Finland).

In Finland and Sweden, a contact person or family cannot legally be appointed against the will of the child or the child's parent(s), and children of any age must have an opportunity to express their views and wishes. Thus, a child has a right but not an obligation to have a contact person or family. One must, therefore, ask whether children have room or "permission" to resist or explicitly express dissent, and if so, how this is dealt with by contact persons, families or services, and what the consequences will be. If no such room exists, the child is neither a fully active party nor a here-and-now citizen.

Our data indicate that children with a contact person or contact family currently have no opportunities for collective participation in public child welfare services. By collective participation, we mean a process of engagement in which children can work together and influence the initiation, direction or goal of an intervention provided for them (Larkins et al., 2014). As individuals, children might find taking an active role and participating challenging. For example, in formal meetings they are usually surrounded by several adults and are expected to answer questions, although, as we were told by children in the workshops, the child should not be assumed to want to share all their insights with everyone present. In addition to formal meetings, children as citizens and rights-holders also expect professionals to make direct contact and show interest in between follow-up meetings: "Well this is in a way for us, but then we never get anything from anybody [contacts made by social workers or other professionals]. Not that I necessarily need anything, but it's a bit strange" (girl aged 17, Finland).

Supporting children's individual participation is not necessarily an easy task for either contact persons or contact family parents. Children saying "yes" or "no" could be considered to constitute sufficient participation. In intergenerational relations, expectations and understandings of the role and status of children are usually dominated by adults (Cockburn & Devine, 2020; Thomas, 2021). The inherent power imbalance between adult and child indicates that this must be acknowledged. The concept of lived citizenship may lead adults to recognise that while they cannot be anything but adults, they can try to resist the norms associated with adulthood (Atkinson, 2019; Raffety, 2015), such as being satisfied with the minimum participation of children.

Friendship, kinning and normalising as platforms for belonging

Public child welfare services are a context for making and maintaining a reciprocal, caring relationship between the child and contact person or family. The flexible nature of the support given in contact person and family interventions became evident when the quality of the relationship was discussed. Our data show that a contact person or contact family member can be seen as a friend, a role model or almost a family member, depending on the aims of the intervention and development of the inter-individual relationship. Children, especially those with a contact person, describe them as a trusted person, more of an equal friend, particularly when the age gap is small. However, when the age gap between child and volunteer is wide, the child does not call the relationship a friendship (see Korkiamäki & O'Dare, 2021). In contact families, friendships are also often formed between peers, visiting children and the contact family's children (see also Lehto-Lundén, 2020). However, spending time with a contact person or contact family may also cause a child to experience being and belonging among peers as challenging. A 12-year-old boy, for example, found it embarrassing to have a contact person who was older and female: "Somebody might wonder why you hang out with her. Maybe I won't need one [contact person] next year, when I am older, because by then it'll probably be too embarrassing" (boy aged 12, Finland).

In this case, the boy, contact person and social worker agreed to call the volunteer his aunt if peers asked about her, as kinship relationships are more understandable. In our data, children also called a contact person a "big sister" or the contact family parents "grandma" and "grandpa": "I don't feel she's like a contact person, she's like a big sister to me. And we don't actually have that big age difference either" (girl aged 17, Finland). Forming kinship-like relationships is often supported by social workers and parents (see also Moilanen, 2015; Svenlin, 2020). According to Howell (2003, p. 465), the concept of kinning refers to a practice "whereby a previously unconnected person is brought into a significant and permanent relationship with a group of people that is expressed in a kin idiom." The kinning of a contact person or contact family may indicate that the child perceives the relationship as durable (cf. Stock, 2019) and equates it with belonging to a family community. Social workers may also see "kinning" as connected to the idea of becoming, the perceived older and wiser role model indicating a future direction and friendship as more about a form of being. The social workers often reported that "good" role models or adult family members were lacking in the child's life:

It could be a youth who is fairly isolated, it could be difficult with, not having a lot of friends, or not having much of a network ... compensate with other adults, or good adults, who have the time and capacity and commitment. (Social worker, Sweden)

The contact person or contact family can be viewed as a good example for a future life, a person who can model “normality” as opposed to the child’s “less normal” current family situation. The goals set for a contact family intervention often relate to the aim of “learning family life,” that is, giving the child a “different” model of family life, including such daily routines as eating and communicating together (Svenlin & Lehto-Lundén, 2023). Such thinking may underscore both the idea of children as would-be “family citizens” and the idea of a home and private space as “right” for children as becoming citizens (Lister, 2007b, p. 714). Moreover, recurring routines and habits may help to create a bond between the child and the contact family that invites the child to belong to a family community. However, the child may also notice the contrast between their “natural” family life and the contribution made to their life by the contact person or family: “They were nice and we played board games and they taught me new things and I got to be at their place a lot. So, I got to be with a family that functioned in a normal way” (girl aged 14, Sweden).

Our data show that sometimes the child’s parents and the contact person or family collaborated as equals in setting the goals for the child’s well-being in a direction approved by social services. Thus, all parties agreed on the strategies to be implemented. However, when the social workers and parents did not agree, a strong bond between the contact person or contact family and the child’s family could be problematic, depending on the contact person or family’s values. This was especially visible in discussions on the integration of immigrant children and families:

Social worker: I have rejected contact persons where I know that there is obviously a problem with honour-based norms and honour-based violence in the family or similar limitations on the girls in the family.

Interviewer: You mean those who want to be a contact person or family?

Social worker: Yes, I don’t think you will be suitable as a contact person in Sweden because then you will reinforce those values. (Social worker, Sweden)

The social worker above also stated that while the parent’s wishes regarding a shared religion or values should be respected, there is a point at which the societal integration and well-being of the child take priority. Hence, when the client family and the contact family or person can connect over shared values and struggles, this can create a form of sub-cultural belonging that can be condoned or even encouraged. However, because the contact person or family is a representative of the society both parties live in, their values need to accord with their new society’s values. The “belonging” constructed in the frame of these interventions always aims towards achieving some kind of societal normality. When this is challenged, the child’s future integration and development as an acting citizen override the present situation.

Discussion and conclusion

Children's citizenship has been discussed in this study by linking the dimensions of being, becoming and belonging to the concept of lived citizenship, a standpoint that sees children as being and becoming citizens and as belonging to citizen communities (Cockburn, 2017; Lister, 2007a, 2007b; Warming, 2018; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). Wood (2022) understands youth citizenship as similarly constructed, i.e., through the intersection of becoming, being and doing, and thus focuses on the performative aspects of citizenship. She sees this approach as providing researchers with an alternative possibility to challenge "the binaries and limitations of the vulnerability/autonomous agents discourses that have characterised the field" (Wood, 2022).

Children's lived citizenship is especially linked to if, and if so, how, contact person and contact family interventions support children as "here-and-now" and not (exclusively) as becoming future citizens. The lived citizenship approach foregrounds children's rights in relation to, e.g., child welfare services, and how social, material and cultural circumstances are perceived to affect children's lives as citizens (see Lister, 2007a, 2007b). The approach is also about a child and contact person or contact family jointly interpreting and negotiating their respective rights and responsibilities as equal partners in co-operation with social workers and parents. In addition, the approach highlights children's possibilities to participate both in planning and performing shared activities with their contact persons or families and in decision-making with their contact persons or families, social workers and parents. Lived citizenship also implies togetherness or "shared being," which have obvious meanings in the context of belonging to citizen communities (Lister, 2007a, 2007b). Relationships and activities with the contact person or contact family can be seen as a site or mode of belonging (see Artero & Ambrosini, 2022) and are therefore fundamental for children's enactment of their citizenship, as "social relations are the 'glue' that make rights and responsibilities necessary, belonging possible, and participation meaningful" (Bonnesen, 2020, p. 2).

Participation, both individual and collective, is a key dimension of children's lived citizenship (e.g., Lister, 2007a, 2007b; Warming, 2018). However, the so-called participation rights declared by the UN (United Nations, 1989) do not guarantee children the conditions necessary to exercise their rights, as citizenship is not limited by legislation or established political orders alone (Liebel, 2020). For Liebel (2020), the actualisation of children's citizenship requires the creation of conditions that enable children to develop their agency competencies and use them in practice. In our view, this entails creating the appropriate conditions for being, becoming and belonging. These can be realised if children are seen not only as individuals in their everyday relations and daily life but also as capable of collective action. This, in turn, requires that adults support children in creating collective forums for action.

Our study indicates that children with a contact person or contact family currently have no opportunities for collective participation in the context of child welfare services. Thus, efforts are needed to strengthen children's opportunities for collective participation with their contact person or contact family as a means of challenging the established politics of belonging that exclude minors from citizen communities (cf. Artero & Ambrosini,

2022). Another question is whether, and if so, how, children’s “collective will” is supported by adults to “not only preserve their own space or conquer it but also influence the environment or wider society” (Liebel, 2008, p. 42).

We conclude from this study that contact person and contact family interventions play an important role in constructing children’s lived citizenship and that including discussion on citizenship foregrounds the child’s position in these interventions. Such interventions may provide children with new resources and a way of belonging to established parts of society and, as they witness active citizenship in practice through the engaged volunteers they meet, enhance their chances of becoming more aware of their rights and responsibilities. At present, children are provided with activities and contexts that are thought to match their needs and interests. While this is most likely a positive experience, it is not a way of being fully a citizen, as children’s active participation often seems to be governed by adults. Hence, more studies and reflection are needed on children’s everyday citizenship practices, especially on children’s viewpoints and interpretations (see also Larkins, 2014). However, as Wood (2022) notes, it is equally important that research methodologies consider relational interdependencies and children’s intergenerational connections, i.e., adults’ roles in shaping children’s citizenship. In child welfare services, it is important that the conditions for children’s citizenship are not created and viewed (solely) as “citizenship from above,” that is, determined by adults, whether parents, contact persons or families, professionals, decision-makers, lawmakers or others who work with children.

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Author biographies

Johanna Moilanen, PhD, is a senior researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her current research interests include social work with children, young people and families, peer support and voluntary work in social work, and social work history.

Tiina Lehto-Lundén, PhD, is a senior lecturer at the Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, Finland. Her current research interests include social work with children and families, childhood studies, children's experiences and voluntary work in social work.

Lotta Jägervi, PhD, is a senior lecturer at Lund University, Sweden. She is also a licensed psychologist with experience from working with children and families. Her current research interests are voluntary social work, social work with children and families, victimology and reproductive health.

Johanna Kiili, PhD, is an associate professor at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. She has also worked as a senior lecturer, postdoctoral researcher and senior officer at the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in Finland. She has expertise in multidisciplinary childhood studies, action research, research ethics, children's agency and participation, expertise-by-experience and child protection research.

Kerstin Svensson, PhD, is Professor in Social Work at Lund University, Sweden. Her research concerns social work practices in different forms and contexts. She has published extensively on social workers and their practices, as well as on volunteers engaged in areas where the public sector dominates.

Anu-Riina Svenlin, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at Umeå University, Sweden. Her current research interests include child and family social work, voluntary work in social work, peer support, evaluation and critical realism.