



Capabilities and well-being of child and adolescent social services clients in the Czech Republic



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this empirical paper was to answer the following question: “What are the desirable and the actually achieved capabilities in relation to the well-being of children and adolescents using social services in the Czech Republic from their own point of view, from that of their parents or foster parents and social workers?” Our research study was based on the capability approach and looked at the well-being of vulnerable children who are clients of social service providers in the Czech Republic. It was conducted through a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Children and adolescents aged 11–22 years ($n = 28$) and their parents or foster parents ($n = 16$) were surveyed using the technique of in-depth semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey. We also held a focus group with 15 social workers working with these clients. The study has shown that what children need the most for their sense of well-being are harmonious relationships, particularly with their parents. This finding is all the more serious as parents are not fully aware of the importance of their love and care for their children’s lives, as also evidenced in our empirical findings. The research finding that we consider the most disturbing is that children lack capabilities that would allow them to experience a meaningful life. This is most pronounced in their views of their future, which they do not associate with any hope. They do not see their future as providing opportunities for a positive life experience. Another key finding is that both children and parents marginalise capabilities developed through education. What is particularly alarming is that parents were much more likely to marginalise education than their children. Although these children are users of social services, these services proved unable to provide adequate formal support for them and their parents. Based on our study of children and families using social services we recommend that social services should focus on fostering the relationship between parents/foster parents and children. Particular attention should be paid to developing adolescents’ potential, while taking into consideration their natural need to learn new skills so that they could live a more active life translating into a more meaningful life experience at present, as well as into a sustained sense of meaning in life in the future.

1. Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention, 1989) establishes that the state should ensure all children below 18 years such protection and care as is necessary for their well-being. Despite that the legislative concept of children’s well-being is part of routine practice of social workers working in child protection in the Czech Republic, its meaning is not entirely clear. This creates a number of practical difficulties, particularly in the area of assessment (Navrátilová, 2018). Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frønes, and Korbin (2014) have pointed out that support of children’s well-being is marked by differences in social, cultural and economic notions of what children’s well-being is. One of the consequences of the differences in concepts is a focus on selected fragments

of children’s well-being and an absence of a holistic approach. According to Sandin (2014), the focus on only selected aspects of children’s well-being also results from the fact that debates about children’s well-being are carried out primarily as a response to emerging problems. In order to avoid this fragmentation in our study and to take due account of the social, cultural and economic specifics of the situation of child users of social services, we based our study on the capability approach, which can well respond to this variability. The chosen capability approach was developed by Sen and Nussbaum (1993) and its advantage is that it reflects the developments in the perceptions of the child and childhood that have occurred in social sciences.

As Fegter and Richter (2014) have pointed out, these changes manifest themselves in three aspects: (a) the child is regarded as a

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distinct social actor and this is also reflected in research, where the child has become an autonomous research subject and is no longer examined merely as part of the family; (b) research needs to validate different areas of children's daily lives (e.g. the area of relationships, access to education and leisure activities); (c) Emphasis is placed on active involvement of children who are recognised as “experts on their own lives”. As regards the assessment of children's well-being, we can see a radical shift from the previous adult-centred perspective towards a child-centred perspective, where the child has gained an important opportunity to freely express their preferences and have a say in their own well-being.

The sense of well-being derives not only from individual but also social factors. Therefore, when assessing well-being we also examine factors in the broader socio-ecological context, as they are informative of the assets available to children in seeking well-being, as well as of potential barriers to well-being. However, as Garbarino (2014) has pointed out in this context, the focus remains on the person of the child who is the heart of the socio-ecological concept. The child's own view of what is good for them and what life they want to live is a key aspect in assessing the child's well-being. That is also why we focused our research on the child. In line with Biggeri, Libanora, Mariani, and Menchini (2006), Biggeri, Ballet and Comim (2011), we put the child's perspective at the very centre of our research design. This perspective was supplemented with that of adults – children's parents or foster parents and social workers. Our research looked at children and adolescents who are clients of these social workers in the Czech Republic. The aim of this empirical paper was to answer the following question: “*What are the desirable and the actually achieved capabilities in relation to the well-being of children and adolescents using social services in the Czech Republic from their own point of view, from that of their parents or foster parents and social workers?*” We see these children as a group of people whose right to flourish in life is being challenged and who need external help. We also deliberately examined the perspective of other actors. In line with data triangulation, we sought to explore the capabilities of children and adolescents from the adult perspective and to gain information on those aspects of life that are based on a broader socio-ecological framework. In the Czech Republic, this has so far been the only research study that has examined the well-being of children from the child's perspective using the capability approach. In the Czech context, the prevailing opinion is that the needs of children and adolescents should be defined by adults. With this research, we want to highlight the importance of giving children and adolescents a voice to express themselves, as their perception of needs may be very different from other people's perceptions.

2. The capability approach and children's well-being

We have conceptually anchored the assessment of the well-being of children and young people upon the capability approach because of its concern with equitable access to conditions allowing people to live a life they have reason to value. The pioneer of the capability approach was the Nobel Prize winner for economics Amartya Sen (1992, 1993, 1999, 2009) whose ideas have served as a philosophical basis for benchmarking analyses conducted under the UN Development Programme since 1990. By defining quality-of-life and development criteria, Sen has contributed significantly to the conceptualisation of human well-being, including the Human Development Index (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). Against the backdrop of global inequalities and poverty, Sen criticised liberal philosophical reflections on equality of access to human well-being in a lecture entitled “Equality of What?” at Stanford University in 1979, focusing attention on the variability of human behaviour and subjective experience of well-being (Henderson & Denny, 2015). He was interested in what people value and how they can achieve the capability to be and to do things that make up a good, diverse and humane life (Venkatapuram, 2011). It is precisely this concern that is essential for the study of well-being of vulnerable

children and adolescents, since our focus is also on the extent to which the circumstances of their lives allow them to live a good life.

According to Sen, human functioning in society derives from so-called capabilities, which this author perceives as “the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another ... to choose from possible livings” (Sen, 1992: 40). Thus, capabilities are “the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value” (Sen, 1999: 87). The different levels of capabilities derive from the different options that Sen (1993) argues stem from individual differences between people, including their cultural and social specificities. As Otto and Ziegler (2008) have pointed out in this context, it is always important to study the relation between social opportunities and individual needs.

One of the main advantages of Sen's concept is its flexibility and inherent pluralism, which has allowed other researchers to further develop it in different directions (Alkire, 2002). The very fact that Sen did not formulate any list of capabilities inspired many of his followers, such as Alkire and Black (1997), Biggeri et al. (2011), Clark (2002, 2003), Desai (1995), Nussbaum (1990, 2000, 2003) and Robeyns (2003). Among the most influential authors is Martha Nussbaum (1990, 2000, 2003, 2007), Nussbaum and Sen (1993) who focused predominantly on human rights. In a critical response to Sen, and based on her own work with people with disabilities, she pointed to the fact that not all people in society are able to articulate and assert their rights (Nussbaum, 2007), which may also apply to children and adolescents. Building on ideas of Aristotle, she outlined a list of ten capabilities that are fundamental to every person's decent life. According to Nussbaum, the political organisation of the state should ensure that at least a minimum standard is provided to all citizens along the lines of these ten principles. Although her design of the list of capabilities has been criticised for oversimplification of reality and inadequate reflection of the diversity of human life (Clark, 2002, 2006; Gasper, 2004), it undoubtedly has a significant methodological value. Indeed, Nussbaum herself encouraged other researchers to develop her concept further.

In the area of children's well-being, the credit for this goes mainly to Trani, Bakhshi, Bellanca, Biggeri, & Marchetta (2011), Robeyns (2003), Biggeri et al. (2011) and Biggeri and Karkara (2014). It is the concept proposed by Biggeri et al. that we based our research study on. In the authors' view, children are autonomous social actors who are able to express their opinions and priorities. The social organisation should facilitate the development of their capabilities that enable them to freely pursue a flourishing life (Biggeri & Karkara, 2014). In their project “Listen to Children Establishing Their Priorities”, Biggeri, Libanora, Mariani, and Menchini (2004) let children and adolescents themselves define their capabilities. Building on Nussbaum (2000), they then compiled a list of capabilities relevant for children and adolescents (Biggeri et al., 2006: 65-66):

1. *Life and physical health* – being able to be physically healthy and enjoy a life of normal length
2. *Love and care* – being able to love and be loved by those who care for us and being able to be protected*
3. *Mental well-being* – being able to be mentally healthy
4. *Bodily integrity and safety* – being able to be protected from violence of any sort
5. *Social relations* – being able to enjoy social networks and to give and receive social support*
6. *Participation* – being able to participate in public and social life and to have a fair share of influence and being able to receive objective information*
7. *Education* – being able to be educated
8. *Freedom from economic and non-economic exploitation* – being able to be protected from economic and non-economic exploitation*
9. *Shelter and environment* – being able to be sheltered and to live in a

safe and pleasant environment

10. *Leisure activities* – being able to engage in leisure activities
11. *Respect* – being able to be respected and treated with dignity
12. *Religion and identity* – being able to choose to live, or not to live, according to a religion and identity*
13. *Time-autonomy* – being able to exercise autonomy in allocating one's time and undertake projects*
14. *Mobility* – being able to be mobile*

*depending on the age of the child

Biggeri et al. (2006) emphasise that the assessment of capabilities depends on the age and degree of maturity of the child or adolescent and that the above list is open and flexible. At the same time (Biggeri et al., 2006), they draw attention to the fact that for some capabilities (such as love and care) it is desirable to extend research into other areas as well (such as love and care of parents, siblings and other relatives, or support from teachers, neighbours, friends and peers). In another publication, the authors emphasise the educational and formative influence of parents and other people (Biggeri & Kalkara, 2014), since their attitudes and decisions fundamentally influence the chances that the child's capabilities will be converted into functionings. The authors further assert that parents and other people must respect the child's freedom and wishes, while helping the child to develop and fulfil its potential, even if this is contrary to the child's wishes and perceptiveness. We have taken this fact into consideration in our research study and, in line with data triangulation, we examined parents' and foster parents' perceptions of how their children's or adolescent children's capabilities are fulfilled, as well as the perceptions of social workers who have direct professional experience with the children.

3. Methods

The aim of our research study was to answer the following research question: “*What are the desirable and the actually achieved capabilities in relation to the well-being of children and adolescents using social services in the Czech Republic from their own point of view, from that of their parents or foster parents and social workers?*”

3.1. Participants

For the purposes of our research, we used the purposive, criterion and key informant sampling methods. First we identified local government and non-government organisations providing social services to vulnerable families and children in the Czech Republic (e.g. low-threshold centres for children and youth, shelters for adolescents or mothers with children, counselling centres for vulnerable or foster families). In each of these organisations we selected one social worker who fulfilled the following criteria: a degree in social work, at least one year's professional experience of direct work with children and their families in the given organisation and consent to participate in our research study. These workers recommended further respondents from among their clients as it was direct service users (children and adolescents up to the age of 22) who were at the centre of our research (the sampling method used for children and adolescents was key informant sampling). We are aware of the fact that this type of selection, where we left the choice up to the social workers, may result in some bias in that the social workers may have given preference to certain clients in the sampling of study subjects. However, the research aim was not to assess the level of services provided by social workers but to assess the capabilities of children and adolescents and therefore we believe that this sampling method was appropriate.

We focused on children and adolescents using social services in the selected cities in the Czech Republic, regardless of their situation in life (we did not examine the forms of their risk-taking behaviours or the vulnerability of their families). In total, 28 children and adolescents were interviewed. We also carried out 16 interviews with their parents/

Table 1

Sample.

Respondents	Number	Age	Average age
Child or adolescent	28	11–22	15,4
Parent/foster parent	16	25–70	44,6
Social worker	15	–	–

foster parents. Of the child/adolescent and parent respondents, 45% were men and 55% were women. The sample included both children and adolescents growing up with their biological families (21 children and adolescents and 9 parents) and those in foster families (7 children and adolescents and 7 foster parents). The reasons for the children entering foster care were not the subject of this research.

In order to obtain the most comprehensive possible picture of the desirable and the actually achieved capabilities facilitating children's well-being, we were also interested in the view of the abovementioned social workers who work with these children and help them deal with their difficult life situations. In the next stage of the research, after we had completed the survey of children and their parents/foster parents, we therefore also explored the social workers' views. The composition of the sample is shown in Table 1 below.

Altogether, the respondents in our research were children and adolescents, their parents/foster parents (n = 44) and social workers from social service organisations (n = 15). In total, 59 respondents were surveyed. All study participants gave their informed consent to participate in the research study and, in compliance with relevant ethical requirements for research, were also informed of the possibility to withdraw from the research study at any time (none of the respondents used this option). The research was approved by the Ethics Board of the Masaryk University. We obtained informed consent to participate in the research both from the children and adolescents themselves and from their legal representatives. After the interviews were conducted, the identities of all conversation partners were consistently anonymised using randomly assigned codes.

3.2. Empirical design

The research was carried out in several stages. In the first stage, we focused on identifying the capabilities seen as relevant by children/adolescents and their parents/foster parents themselves. The empirical survey was conducted through a combination of a qualitative and quantitative strategy, using the technique of individual semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire survey. We developed flexible questionnaires for children and adolescents and their parents/foster parents that included a list of different capabilities. This flexibility consisted in the fact that respondents had the opportunity to make their own choice of relevant dimensions on which to base the questionnaire. The questionnaire dimensions had not been communicated to them beforehand. In order to test the clarity of the interviews and questionnaires, pilot interviews were conducted with children/adolescents and parents.

In agreement with Biggeri et al. (2011), Biggeri and Karkara (2014), the research study proceeded in accordance with the following general scenario:

- 1) Identification of the capabilities seen as relevant by children and their parents/foster parents (identification of the “ideal situation”) – respondents answered the question: “*What are the most important opportunities a child/adolescent should have during their life?*”
- 2) Description of the achieved functionings in individual dimensions of capabilities – respondents answered a specific question for every capability, e.g. in the case of health: “*Are you healthy?*”

(at present)?/ “*Is your child healthy now?*”

The purpose of the first question was to determine which

capabilities are relevant without limiting the possible answers to a predefined list of capabilities. If a child mentioned a capability that was not listed in the questionnaire, their answer was added to the list. If a child mentioned a capability already listed, the answer was only recorded.

Subsequently, the child was asked about the actually achieved functionings in relation to the capabilities it had previously mentioned (see point 2 above). The first question thus explored the “ideal state”, whereas the second one examined how they were doing in terms of capabilities in their real life. The result was scored on a Likert scale (ranging from 1 – lacking capability to 10 – abundance of capability). Subsequently, we followed the same procedure to examine the attitudes of parents/foster parents, whom we also interviewed through semi-structured interviews. The way their answers were recorded in the questionnaire was the same as with the children/adolescents. The interviews were conducted either in the respondents’ homes or at the premises of the social services organisations. Privacy was always ensured. Apart from the interviewer, only the child/adolescent or the parent was present during the interview. The interviewers were the authors of this paper.

In the second stage, we turned our attention to social workers. We based this part of our study on a qualitative strategy, using the focus group and focus writing techniques. First, the respondents gave written answers to the following two questions:

- 1 What are the most important opportunities that children/adolescents should have in order to prosper in life?
- 2 What opportunities are not available to children/adolescents with whom you work?

This was followed by a focus group discussion where the participants reflected more in depth on the individual points raised through focus writing. The discussion was transcribed. The focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed verbatim and the transcript served as the basis for data analysis. The different stages are shown in Table 2 below.

4. Results and discussion

The aim of this empirical paper was to answer the research question: “What are the desirable and the actually achieved capabilities in relation to the well-being of children and adolescents using social services in the Czech Republic from their own point of view, from that of their parents or foster parents and social workers?” The key for us was the perspective of the child (James, 2003; Funk, Hagan, & Schimming, 1999; Ben-Arieh, 2005), which allowed us to look at the subject matter in a more holistic way. The following section presents the results of the empirical analysis. First, we analyse answers to the first question, which looked into respondents’ ideas about ideal capabilities in children/adolescents. Then we look at the actually achieved capabilities, where it is their absence that is particularly interesting for us in the context of children’s well-being.

4.1. What children need for their sense of well-being

First, we asked respondents the question: “What are the most important opportunities a child/adolescent should have (in general and as a member of a social group) during their life?”. Building on Nussbaum (2007), we acknowledge that it is these essential opportunities that our respondents consider to be valuable and that they need for their well-being. That is why we first looked at which capabilities our respondents (child and adolescent social work clients, their parents/foster parents and social workers who work with them) themselves consider significant. The empirical results of this part of our study are shown in Table 3 below.

It is not surprising that respondents from all three groups consider

Table 2
The empirical study design.

Phase	Respondent	Techniques	Research goal	Examples of questions
1	Child/adolescent Parent/foster parent	semi-structured interviews, questionnaire semi-structured interviews, questionnaire	identification of the capabilities seen as relevant description of the achieved functionings in individual dimensions of capabilities identification of the capabilities seen as relevant description of the achieved functionings in individual dimensions of capabilities	What are the most important opportunities a child/adolescent should have during their life? Are you healthy (at present)? What are the most important opportunities a child/adolescent should have during their life? Is your child healthy now?
2.	Social worker	focus writing, focus group	identification of the capabilities seen as relevant Identification of the capabilities seen as unavailable to clients	What are the most important opportunities that children/adolescents should have in order to prosper in life? What opportunities are not available to children/adolescents with whom you work?

Table 3
Which capabilities does a child/adolescent need for their well-being.

Areas of life	Child/adolescent		Parent		Social worker	
	n = 28	%	n = 16	%	n = 15	%
Loving parents	25	89	9	56	15	100
Friends	16	57	3	19	3	20
Good relationships	12	43	7	44	3	20
Chance to learn new things	4	14	10	63	5	33
Health	3	11	9	56		
Siblings	7	25	4	25		
Safety	3	11	8	50	3	20
Open future	4	14	6	38	1	7
Relatives	5	18	3	19	3	20
To be feeling fine	3	11	5	31	1	7
No bullying or exploitation	3	11	5	31		
Nice clean environment	3	11	5	31	2	14
Respect	3	11	4	25	1	7
Entertainment	4	14	3	19	3	20
Money	6	22	1	6		
Goals	3	11	3	19		
Going where I want	3	11	3	19	3	20
Work	4	14	2	13	1	7
Enough time	3	11	2	13	5	33
School	4	14	1	6	11	73
Orientation in life			4	25	1	7

the presence of **loving and caring parents** (or foster parents) to be the most important asset. Here we have found a very interesting difference in the perception of this basic capability, in the sense that its importance was widely acknowledged by all 15 social workers, by 25 children and adolescents but only by 9 of the 16 parents.

A social worker from a youth counselling centre (B5) spoke of the role of parents in the family as follows: *“For children and youth, for them to prosper, what is essential is a safe family in which they have supportive relationships, where they feel loving care and clear boundaries, and this model is reinforced by well-established family values; a family where children and adolescents are listened to, where their real needs are acknowledged and where these needs are being met in the case of the youngest children”*. Maturkanič (2010a) has also highlighted the vital role of love in developing children's personalities and uniqueness, and has linked advancement of humanity with the amount of love that a human individual has received and further nurtured.

This need, clearly seen as the strongest, is immediately followed by two important categories of good well-being prerequisites. The first one is the presence of **harmonious relationships** (by 12 of the 28 children and adolescents, by 7 parents and by 3 of the 15 social workers) and the presence of **good friends** (by 16 of the 28 children and adolescents). A teenage client (5A) of a low-threshold centre said: *“I need friends. Friends who don't support me, that sucks.”* The important role of friends in the lives of children and adolescents is acknowledged also by social workers (by 3 of 15) and parents (by 3 of 16) but we can see a certain decline in significance. Possible pitfalls associated with friendships were pointed out by mother 25B who said: *“Friends, and he has bad friends. His friends are false. He is such a giver and they are so mean to him. So that's my son. So I'm the one who always fixes things for him then. I'm a big mouth. He wouldn't tell on them but I can tell he's hurting, and I don't want him to be hurting, so I always go outside and say: get in here, whoever did whatever to him, and it's sorted in no time. They're always so nasty, that's awful. He can have his friends, but friends that do not force him into things.”*

Next, children and adolescents emphasised the role of **siblings** in their lives (one quarter of 28) – here they were in agreement with their parents in terms of the percentage rating of this capability. Overall, the study has shown that children and adolescents primarily need social relationships in order to live their lives happily, be it relationships with parents, friends, good relationships with other people in general, as well as also with their siblings. This fact was aptly characterised by a

teenage user of asylum housing services (8A): *“The family, after the family friends are the most important, after friends there are close acquaintances. Basically, I can do with only three groups of people in my life – the family, friends and acquaintances. He who has a good family, who has good friends and who has good acquaintances, doesn't lack a thing. With these people, you can get everything sorted out. Good relationships are important to me.”* This respondent also articulated his attitude to parenting based on his own painful experience as follows: *“It may be a bit nasty of me as a father's son to say this, but the father and mother should actually bend over backwards for their son, because that's what I would surely do”*. We present his statement as an example of the fact that respondents do not always get the potentialities that they desire.

It is not surprising that the most important thing for children and adolescents is the presence of loving and caring parents (or foster parents). All three groups of respondents agreed on this. The importance of this capability was demonstrated also in a study of children's well-being by Biggeri et al. (2006), where child and teenage respondents considered this capability the second most valuable in their lives. What interested us, however, was a difference in the perception of this basic capability between the different types of respondents. All social workers and almost all children/adolescents consider it the most important, whereas parents themselves attach the least significance to it, as illustrated by the respondent quote above (8A). It would appear that parents, who are the vehicle for conveying this capability, do not always recognise their key role in providing loving care to their children. This empirical finding implies that in order to improve children's well-being parental competences need to be developed, particularly with respect to their relationship skills. Also other frequently stated capabilities referred to the fact that children and adolescents need a good network of social relationships (with their parents, friends and siblings) in order to live a happy life.

Another relevant capability that was deemed to be important by 10 of the 16 parents and as many as a third of social workers was the opportunity to learn something new. This capability relates to the opportunity to **learn something new**. Foster parent 6B2 associated this potential with education and leisure activities: *“Perhaps available education, education taking into account their specifics. That seems the most important thing to me. Then also the possibility to use free time, again with regard to their specifics, because some children do well in normal clubs for children and some don't. For instance, one of ours is doing well in the scouts, the other one not quite so. The problem is not to find a club, the problem is to make our children stay there. That's why it's necessary to have special teachers there and so on.”* However, further empirical findings have indicated that children themselves are not overly concerned with this potentiality. Only 4 of 28 consider it important, which may be a mark of a passive approach to life. On the one hand, it is positive that parents, who should inspire and develop children's desire for knowledge, recognise the leverage this capability provides. The question is, however, how they activate their children in this area when the children themselves do not attach much significance to it. The finding that children do not consider personal development to be important and are passive when it comes to new experiences and knowledge is not very positive.

We were also interested in the nature of activities that give opportunities for development. As a matter of fact, the group most likely to raise this subject were social workers. They emphasised the role of **active leisure** (a third of respondents) and **entertainment** options (by 3 respondents) and went on to note that leisure activities for children should also be available on weekends and should be affordable for families on low incomes. We believe that these findings present a real challenge for representatives of municipalities and providers of leisure activities, who should offer such incentives that are attractive and accessible to children and adolescents. As Veenhoven (2001) has found out, when children are offered a game-friendly urban arrangement, their sense of satisfaction increases.

It is a real fact that education is an important part of the lives of children and adolescents and this is where our research has brought an

interesting (and somewhat alarming, as one might say) finding. While nearly three quarters of social workers considered the opportunity for **education** to be important, this view was shared only by 4 of 28 children and adolescents and one parent. The minor role that education plays in the eyes of children and especially their parents is not a good basis for children's and adolescents' future educational path. This empirical finding, which can be considered one of the most significant, contradicts empirical findings of Biggeri et al. (2006) and Menchini (2006) that have indicated the importance of this capability in the eyes of children and adolescents. Biggeri et al. (2006) have stated that children are aware of the importance of education for their present and future well-being, because their respondents attached the greatest importance to this capability, whereas our child respondents and their parents marginalised it. We believe that this is another important finding of our study, as it points to the existence of risks in educational trajectories of children. If parents do not perceive their children's education as important, there is a risk that they will not motivate and support their children in this area.

One more condition for ensuring well-being that was fairly frequently mentioned by adolescent respondents was enough **money** (by 6 of 28) in contrast to only one parent who prioritised the role of money in the lives of their children. More specifically, it was particularly adolescents from asylum housing that spoke about potentialities related to material security. "To have a job, money and housing. A job and money in the first place and then housing. Without a job, there's no money, without money there's no housing" (9A). "Well, so that I could live in an apartment, not somewhere outside, that is, to have a place to live in..." (16A).

Parents and social workers were more likely to formulate a broader list of capabilities. If we first consider parents we can see that they also included the need for **safety** (half the parents and 3 social workers) and an **open future** (6 parents) among further essential capabilities for the wellbeing of their children. Parents interpreted an open future for their children in the sense of the answer given by respondent 25B who said: "Simply, that he is someone, that he doesn't do what everyone else is doing. You know what's going on here, the kids are so much worse today, they start staying up late, start smoking, then the drugs. I don't want them to do this. Better for him to go somewhere, to become someone, to go to school, not cut classes." A third of parents also find it important that their children **are fine, are not bullied and live in decent conditions** and they wish for them to be able **to find their feet in life** and earn **respect** from others. The significant number of parents expressing the wish that their children should not be bullied and should get respect from others reflects the fact that children from vulnerable families are actually faced with bullying and violence more often than other children (Maturkanič, 2010b).

4.2. What children have and what they lack to achieve well-being

In our study, we also focused on the evaluation of the present state of conditions for children's wellbeing, again from the perspective of children and adolescents, their parents or foster parents and social workers. In interpreting the findings, we give priority to those areas that were rated worse because it is these areas that have empirical implications for improving the well-being of children and adolescents. Respondents carried out the assessment using a scale of 1–10, where 1 indicated an unsatisfactory situation and 10 indicated achievement of the best possible state. The results are shown in Table 4.

We also compare the views of children and their parents in the context of perceptions of social workers that emerged from focus writing and focus group discussions. The results indicate that children and young people have access to a range of potentialities for their well-being. From the perspective of social work, however, it is important to pay attention especially to those potentialities that children are lacking. Our respondents pointed to a number of such potentialities.

The opportunity to **learn something new** was assessed as below average. Children expressed more critical views here than the whole

Table 4
State of the individual areas of life from the viewpoint of children and parents.

Areas of life	Child/adolescent mean	Parent mean
Loving parents	8,48	8,22
Friends	8,5	7,33
Good relationships	8,33	7,43
Chance to learn new things	4,67	6,5
Health	9,33	9,11
Siblings	9,14	10
Safety	7,33	5,57
Open future	3	
Relatives	9	9,67
To be feeling fine	9,33	7,4
No bullying or exploitation	10	6,75
Nice clean environment	9	10
Respect	10	10
Entertainment	6	7
Money	8,5	8
Goals	7,67	5,33
Going where I want		6,75
Work	9,25	10
Enough time	7,67	8,67
School	8	10
Orientation in life	8,5	7

sample of respondents (including parents). The overall average rating score was 5.89. **Entertainment opportunities (leisure opportunities)** were rated slightly above average (6.0) by children and young people. Even in this area of life, there is thus room for improvement. The lack of these capabilities was also highlighted by social workers. In their view, their teenage clients live in environments that do not allow children to flourish. They often live in socially excluded localities, which implies low housing standards, polluted environment, and higher crime rates. The grim financial reality of some families also means that children have no access at all to some leisure activities. As regards selective leisure activities (such as music and art clubs), participation in these is beyond the scope of possibility for these children due to lack of competence. A group at particular risk is children with specific problems, such as children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorders. In this context, social workers often also mentioned their clients having underdeveloped competencies allowing for a meaningful life experience. According to the interviewed professionals, child and adolescent clients lack the competencies improving their daily living skills and facilitating integration into the normal functioning of the majority society. They do not know how to spend free time meaningfully and prefer to idle it away, they are unable to find themselves a hobby. Social workers also gave a very negative assessment of the risks associated with the use of social networks, with children and adolescents often becoming victims of social media. In this context, social workers pointed out that parents do not sufficiently promote their children's competencies allowing for a meaningful life experience and social functioning. These findings are in line with the findings of Navrátilová (2015), who underlined the importance of the relationship between the development of children's potential and the available offer of leisure activities in the Czech environment, emphasising the role of leisure activities in building the identity of children and young people.

Formal resources of support were another area rated inadequate by children and their parents. This dimension can be interpreted to mean places where children, young people and their parents can turn to in case of need, where they can find refuge – these can include organisations providing social services. Parents were more generous in assessing the capabilities in this area (a mean score of 5.5), whereas children were more likely to perceive it as lacking (a mean score of 3). It is possible that a lack of knowledge of available options or their objective absence play a role in this. In both cases, however, this is a serious finding that requires a response. In this connection, mother 18B, who is a client of asylum housing, observed: "Mental well-being, we

would have it if we finally had our own apartment, right. It all depends on the apartment... not move from place to place all the time and live with stress... yeah, you get an apartment, you don't get an apartment, and this one is just for a year, and what about a year from now? So all that year you worry about what comes next... Because (kids) are also scared, aren't they? The older ones already know. They also sense it, as I do. Mom, we're here for a year, what will we do then? I say, I don't know, I really don't know. Like, another asylum again, or finally, the way opens up for us to get an apartment, or I don't know." Social workers also spoke about inadequate fulfilment of this capability. The importance of the **availability of resources of formal support** for children and adolescents with specific needs and their families was underlined by 20% of social workers. Social workers included among these resources mainly available assistance from social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, teachers and lawyers. Social workers also agreed that these services should be extended to also include field services, which in the case of these specific professions are not sufficient in the Czech Republic. Furthermore, social workers drew attention to failing institutional support, which makes the situation of children even more difficult. This is particularly apparent in cases where children remain subject of institutional decision-making processes for unduly long periods of time due to bureaucratic inertia. This has negative consequences for children in foster care, for example, as due to Czech legislation they remain in temporary custody for a long time instead of being placed in families where they would live permanently. Temporary custody was introduced in the Czech Republic in 2013. The initial intention was to provide short-term care for children who could not stay with their own families. In reality, children remain in temporary custody for far too long and are often placed in temporary custody repeatedly. If it is not possible to reconstruct the biological family or to find a suitable permanent foster family, children may, in some cases, find themselves back in a residential care home.

The informants associated the failure in this area with lacking multidisciplinary and multi-institutional cooperation. In practice, this means that cases of child and adolescent clients are not subject to case management but depend on a decision of a single worker. Similarly, support from educational institutions is not adequate either according to social workers. The current structure of the educational system fails to adequately respond to the needs of child and adolescent clients of our informants and instead of contributing to their socialisation, it often deepens differences and segregates them. This applies particularly to children living in dysfunctional family environments or children with specific needs (e.g. due to a health impairment). If children have problems at school, our informants' experience indicates that it is very difficult to get help from psychologists or special teachers due to insufficient staff numbers in this sector.

The worst-rated item was the outlook for an **open future**, which received the lowest average rating of 3. What is noteworthy here is that this item was rated the same by both children and their parents, as if the sceptical view of the future of children fairly universally outweighed optimism and hope. We consider this to be one of the key empirical findings. We believe that the absence of hope and trust that our actions can influence the future, does not create a good basis for a happy future and is also detrimental to adolescents' present well-being, because it leads to merely surviving, instead of enjoying life. Professionals also pointed out that adolescents are often at a loss for what they would like to do in their lives and lack a concept of future and a concept of meaning in life. Their inability to establish personal relationships with other people, in combination with dependence on social networks, leads to isolation and loneliness. In this context, social workers also pointed out a lack of positive role models and an absence of a model where parents instil values that are socially recognised in their children. The actual role models rather encourage risk-taking behaviours, which derives from their value system that tends to exclude them from society rather than encouraging social integration and cohesion. Let us add that the views of social workers on the marked absence of this capability

coincided with those of the children themselves and their parents. Scepticism in relation to the future of children seems to outweigh optimism and hope. However, hope is the driving force for human motivation and a key protective factor building resilience to cope with the challenges of life (Frankl, 2017; Punová & Navrátil, 2013; Punová, 2015; Saleebey, 2000).

Social workers, who have direct professional experience with the children and their parents whom we interviewed, also identified a **dysfunctional family environment** as one of the key potential barriers to their clients' well-being. As regards the first question, all social workers agreed that, in the first place, children need loving and caring parents in order to live a happy life. However, as for the second question, they stated that it was precisely this capability that children were lacking the most (it is interesting that their opinions differ here from the perceptions of children and parents who reported having an abundance of this capability – 8.41). Unlike family members, social workers may not be as likely to embellish the situation and rather perceive it in the context of contemporary requirements for family functioning. The risk factors they identified included mainly incomplete family, livelihood concerns and insecure housing. Social workers also often mentioned the influence of underdeveloped parental competencies. In their opinion, adolescent clients often come from families where parents do not know how to properly raise their children. This is reflected, for example, in the fact that they take no interest in being around their children, developing their potential, building good relationships with them and understanding their needs. Social worker respondents also often referred to inappropriate parenting styles, where it is the extreme parenting positions that appear to be particularly problematic. At one extreme is the above-mentioned parental indifference towards children and at the other is an overprotective parental attitude towards children. Respondent B1 described this as follows: *"This is quite a common thing that the child is not allowed to express themselves, and that is protectiveness. For example, you won't go to the park alone, because there are bad boys who would beat you up. You'll be home by six because it's dark outside at eight and something could happen to you. This is overprotection in every sense. You aren't doing well at school, I'll go see the teacher and we'll replace her because she's a bad teacher."* With such an unhealthy and overprotective approach, the child does not develop self-reliance and the ability to cope with the challenges of life, and its resilience potential is undermined. The child does not learn to make independent decisions, act responsibly, and rather develops a strategy of dependency on other people or institutions. We believe that the child may thus become inclined towards external locus of control (Rotter, 1954).

By reflecting on the assessment of the state of life opportunities as given by all respondents, we were able to identify certain differences in perception of reality, which is very important. It is not surprising that children's and adolescents' view of what they have and what they lack in order to live a happy life differs from that of professionals who work with them since they are not in such close contact together as children and adolescents have with their parents and foster parents. This strictly professional relationship allows social workers to take a fresh perspective on the subject. It could have been down to this professional perspective that the respondents' opinions differed markedly on one potentiality, and that was the area of loving parental care. While children and parents regarded this capability as adequately fulfilled, social workers expressed a very different view of the matter. According to them, children in many cases have to cope with a dysfunctional family environment, where the family lacks adequate material resources and parents are at a loss for how to raise their children and develop their potential. It is precisely the social workers' observations that best demonstrated the importance of the role of the family in the development of children's well-being, as well as also a certain link between capabilities achieved by parents and by their children. Social workers highlighted a number of capabilities that their clients' parents were lacking. These deficiencies then weaken the potential for improving children's well-being and limit children's chances to flourish in life

(Sen, 2009). The fact that capabilities achieved by parents influence the achievement of capabilities by their children has also been proven in other research studies (Mehrotra & Biggeri, 2002; Biggeri et al., 2006).

Our research study, like other child-centred studies (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Casas, 2000, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Biggeri et al., 2006), has shown that the perspectives of children and parents differ, which also implies their different perceptions of capabilities. Therefore, we believe that when designing targeted services, we need to seek to understand the child client, not only the opinions and experience of parents and other professionals (which indeed cannot be underestimated either).

We are aware that our research has its limit. As it is only a small-scale qualitative study (using elements of a deductive strategy), it is not possible to draw statistically significant conclusions about the entire population of children and adolescents who use social services. We are also aware that in order to gain a deeper insight into the well-being of children and adolescents, it would be best to assess their overall situation in life, understand the reasons they use the given social services and also pay closer attention to the foster families' specifics. It would also be interesting to examine broader socio-ecological frameworks of children's and adolescents' lives, including wider economic and social factors as well as conditions in which social workers operate. We are conscious that there are many factors that affect the well-being of children and adolescents. However, it is beyond the scope of this study to cover them all.

The application of the capability approach also involves certain limits. Despite the possibility of expectations to the contrary, it is not an instrument for intervention in the clients' difficult life situations. Instead, it is an instrument for assessing this situation. Another limit is the already mentioned variability in different actors' understanding of the capabilities needed to achieve well-being. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the capability approach views individual perceptions of one's needs as being linked to the structural conditions in which the person lives, and these conditions differ across national contexts (therefore, some capabilities are likely to be different for children and adolescents from different countries). Nevertheless, the advantage of the capability approach lies in the fact that it offers a comprehensive tool for assessing human well-being and provides a basis for possible future interventions.

5. Conclusion

In our research on children and adolescents using social worker services, we viewed needs from the perspective of capabilities, which represent an essential basis for the child's reflexive life management. Although the need to support the development of projects aiming to build children's and young people's identity is reflected in social work discourse in the Czech Republic (Navrátil & Navrátilová, 2008; Navrátilová, 2015; Punová, 2013), this rarely translates into actual practice of social work. Therefore, the aim of our research study was to answer the following question: *“What are the desirable and the actually achieved capabilities in relation to the well-being of children and adolescents using social services in the Czech Republic from their own point of view, from that of their parents or foster parents and social workers?”* Building on Biggeri et al. (2011), we focused on two areas. We first looked at the question of what the child needs in order to prosper in life, and then we investigated the extent to which the necessary capabilities are, or are not, available to children. For answers, we went to all the above-mentioned groups of respondents. In this final section, we present research implications for practice. Firstly, it has been shown that the capability approach provides social workers with a highly suitable tool for assessing children's well-being. In applying this approach, it is necessary to seek to understand (give a say to) the child and adolescent client, not only the opinions and experience of parents and social workers. Our empirical results have shown that the views of individual subjects may vary considerably. And we suppose that the very fact

children and adolescents have a different understanding of their well-being than adults allows us to point out that the capability approach can be a tool for assessing children's well-being, because it can bring new perspectives on the topic.

The most important resource for the development of children's potentialities is a functional family environment and, on the contrary, a dysfunctional family may be considered the greatest barrier to children's well-being. Therefore, we recommend that emphasis should be placed on improving family functioning, cultivating those competencies that strengthen relationships within the family, and enhancing skills that promote family cohesion. Social workers should focus more on working with the whole family system. In working with children and adolescents, social services should to a far greater extent accentuate activities that lead to the development and cultivation of skills facilitating the transition from adolescence to adulthood for young people and allowing them to manage their daily lives. Our providers recommend, for example, leisure activities where children and adolescents learn how to spend free time meaningfully, presentations and experiential activities that help develop their personality and that provide space for the search for and construction of their identities. We also recommend that adolescents' and their parents' awareness of the relevance of education as an important predictor of adolescents' future life trajectories should be raised.

Particular emphasis should be placed on increasing adolescents' sensitivity to existential matters so that enhancing meaning in life could lead to a more open view of the future. It is precisely the pessimistic outlook on the future that has proven typical of our children and adolescents. Social workers are faced with an uneasy task to make life more meaningful for adolescents, rouse them from lethargy and call attention to the importance of hope in their lives. This is in order for them to not only survive but also thrive, in the face of everyday tasks, experiencing life with all its ups and downs.

The focus of our study was based on participatory logic and its results will serve as a contribution to the discussion with stakeholders. The aim of the study was to assess the capacities of children and look for difficulties in gaining these capabilities. Based on the study, we proposed selected recommendations that will serve as a basis/a contribution to the discussion on the topic of ensuring the well-being of children and adolescents in the Czech Republic. In the Czech context, there is no legislative definition of children's well-being, neither is there any instrument to measure children's well-being. With this research, we want to contribute to the expert debate concerning the provision of well-being to these vulnerable people.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Punová Monika: Investigation. **Navrátil Pavel:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing. **Navrátilová Jitka:** Funding acquisition, Project administration, Investigation, Data curation.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

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