

# Parenting Support Policy in Finland: Responsibility and Competence as Key Attributes of Good Parenting in Parenting Support Projects

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*In Finland, parenting-related anxiety increased in the 1990s during a deep economic recession and subsequent widespread cutbacks to family services. Despite these cutbacks, resources allocated to services underlining the role of parents – namely, parenting support – increased, manifesting in the establishment of family support projects in the 2000s. Employing positioning theory and pragmatic modalities, I explore how key attributes of good parenting – responsibility and competence – are discussed within family support projects (n = 310). Given discussions regarding the relationship between parenting-related anxiety and the increasing number of parenting-related experts, this article explores parents' positions within such discussions and overall parenting support in Finland. The analysis of projects clarifies the role of the parenting-related experts, but also provides a nuanced view of the position of parents. In some projects, for instance, parents are positioned as experts whose parenting responsibilities and competence are strengthened within peer-parent relationships and shared within the surrounding community.*

**Keywords:** Competence, parenting support, pragmatic modalities, subject position, responsabilisation.

## Introduction

Whilst the family has long stood as a source of concern for policymakers in Finland (Jallinoja, 2006; Yesilova, 2009), the focus has shifted to parenting support as a specific sphere of family policy (Sihvonen, forthcoming) mimicking shifts observed in Europe and beyond (Faircloth *et al.*, 2013a; Daly, 2015). Some scholars refer to these changes in family policy as a 'shift towards parenting' (Faircloth and Murray, 2014) or a 'turn to parenting' (Daly, 2013b). Although this shift has recently been studied in the context of welfare states in other parts of Europe, we still know little about parenting support in the context of the Nordic welfare states such as Finland (cf. Daly and Bray, 2015; Knijn and Hopman, 2015; Lundqvist, 2015; Martin, 2015; Ostner and Stolberg, 2015).

Indeed, particularities appear to exist regarding how family-related welfare politics, particularly state interventions and guidance in family life, are understood in Finland, where traditionally strong welfare state regulations have been in place. For example, state intervention is viewed more as a service and support mechanism rather than as a form of control (Kuronen and Lahtinen, 2011). This article focuses on parenting support as catalogued in the written documents from various family support projects

launched by public and non-governmental organisations in Finland during the 2000s (n = 310).

In order to understand ‘turn to parenting’ in Finland, I first discuss the political context of parenting support within Finnish social policy, particularly after the 1990s, the period identified as the turning point in family policy in other Nordic countries as well (see Littmarck *et al.*, 2018). Finland became a welfare state considerably late in the wave of post-war emancipation. Yet the country quickly increased its contributions to the public’s well-being and established extensive public services based on citizens’ equal rights to receive relatively wide-reaching state-provided benefits and services financed through taxes (Kautto *et al.*, 1999; Anttonen and Sipilä, 2012; Kananen, 2014). However, due to a deep economic recession in the early 1990s, the Finnish welfare state encountered significant difficulties when restructuring social policy, manifesting in serious cutbacks, increased economic polarisation and inequality (Kananen, 2014) as well as increasing rates of poverty amongst families with young children (Kautto *et al.*, 1999; Bardy *et al.*, 2001; Julkunen, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Influenced by emerging neoliberal politics, this led to a ‘paradigm shift’ (Heiskala, 2006) towards a more market-oriented state policy. In essence, the shift included a set of new abstractions and practices such as the responsabilisation of citizens and innovativeness (Heiskala and Luhtakallio, 2006b). Numerous development projects illustrate the expression of these changes (Rantala and Sulkunen, 2006). Furthermore, that paradigm shift, widely studied and discussed as well as argued from various viewpoints by many scholars (Pierson, 2001; Heiskala and Luhtakallio, 2006a; Julkunen, 2006; Rantala and Sulkunen, 2006) was mirrored in family policy, which increased the allocation of resources to a new type of family support (Satka, 2010; Kuronen and Lahtinen, 2011) including parenting support (Sihvonen, forthcoming).

Julkunen (2006: 251) identified a specific discourse for the responsabilisation of families that penetrated the entire discussion of the roles of the state and the family. Along a similar vein, Sulkunen (2009) argued that questions about the common good, used to judge and contest the politics of lifestyle, disappeared. That is, the shift from a normative good life policy to one’s own responsibilities emerged conspicuously within social policy (cf. Rantala and Sulkunen, 2006). This becomes remarkably clear in the aims of family support projects, wherein the responsabilisation of parents remains one of the most important elements in parenting support. Thus, responsabilisation emerges as a key component of family policy, which becomes clear when the core concepts of family support are scrutinised.

Many scholars in the field of family studies have acknowledged the increased attention paid to parents’ conduct. Faircloth *et al.* (2013b: 1) define parenting ‘as a particular historically and socially situated form of childrearing, a product of late twentieth century ideological shifts around family, kinship, risk and social morality.’ Moreover, compared to childrearing, parenting is related to the conduct of parents, whereas childrearing does not exclusively refer to parental conduct (Daly, 2013a: 162; Faircloth and Murray, 2014). In the sociological nomenclature, childrearing identifies the target as children, whereas parenting identifies the subject as the parent. Also Daly’s (2015: 598–599) conceptual considerations indicate that parenting support highlights the means of parenting, namely the conduct and competence of parents.

In this article, I analyse responsibility and competence within family support projects. These two attributes are often associated with good parenthood (e.g. Jallinoja, 2006;

Faircloth *et al.*, 2013b; Lee, 2014a). For example, analysis of public discussions about the well-being of children and youth in Finland identified responsible parenting as a key aspect of good parenthood (Sihvonen, 2008). Whilst discussions about family responsibilities are not unique, a new emphasis has emerged within political discussions in relation to parenting support (e.g. Widding, 2018). These discussions are also reframing social policy in Finland. This article, then, addresses the question of how the responsabilisation of parents is considered within family support projects.

Moreover, as Gillies (2011) notes, it has become increasingly common to evaluate family life in terms of competence and the appropriate conduct of parents. Some scholars emphasise the relationship between broader competence requirements and the expanding role of parenting experts (e.g. Furedi, 2002; Lee, 2014b: 74). As such, good parenting represents a skillset that can be taught by experts (Faircloth *et al.*, 2013b: 5–6). In relation to the identification of the expanded role of parenting experts, investigating the roles available to parents within parenting support becomes necessary. We then must ask: are parents merely the targets of expert-led parenting support or are other positions available to them as well?

In this article, I explore questions related to responsibility and competence by utilising positioning theory (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999) to attain a nuanced view of the subject positions available to parents within family support projects. Inspired by positioning theory, this article examines parenting support as socially constructed in discourse, within which positions are made and remade and in which personal and moral attributes are displayed (van Langenhove and Harré, 1994; 1999). Furthermore, I analyse responsibility and competence as dimensions of pragmatic modalities related to good parenthood (cf. Sulkunen and Törrönen, 1997a; Autto and Törrönen, 2017).

I also utilise and further develop classifications carried out in a previous study of family support projects (cf. Sihvonen, forthcoming). First, I identify two main project categories as prevention projects and intervention projects. Second, two primary approaches to project activities are employed in the analysis of the parent's subject positions – that is, an individualised parenting support approach and a communal parenting support approach.

In the following sections, I first examine the theoretical background of positioning theory as well as responsibility and competence in parenting as dimensions of pragmatic modalities. Then, I introduce my data and methodological steps, and how I carried out the analysis of the subject positions of parents focusing on reference categorisations (intervention/prevention) and themes (individualised/communal approach) identified from the data. I then focus the discussion on how the subject positions of parents are presented in documents from family support projects. Finally, I conclude by outlining my primary findings about the responsabilisation of parents and strengthening parent's competence within family support projects. This allows me to address the primary research question central to this article: namely, how responsible and competent parenthood is supported by Finnish family support projects.

### **Positioning theory and pragmatic modalities**

Hollway (1984), who focused on the construction of subjectivity in heterosexual relationships, first introduced the concepts of 'positioning' and 'position' in social science research. In her study, Hollway stated that positions are constructed in relation to other

people and made available in particular discourses (Hollway, 1984: 236). In positioning theory, these concepts were introduced 'as general metaphors to grasp how persons are "located" within conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story-lines' (van Langenhove and Harré, 1994: 360). Moreover, van Langenhove and Harré expanded this idea to an entire set of rights and obligations, such as relationships of competence and relationships of moral standing (van Langenhove and Harré, 1994: 362).

Given that this article aims to provide a nuanced view of the subject positions of parents in deliberations developing parenting support, some aspects of positioning theory appear useful to an understanding of the subject position of parents. Within positioning theory, positions are viewed as relational, helping to focus attention on the dynamic aspects of the parents' positions compared to the way in which, for example, the use of the role serves to highlight static and formal aspects of parenting (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999: 17; Davies and Harré, 1999: 32). Relationality emerges as significant in this article, since parents' positions as responsible and competent carers are studied in relation to the positions of parenting experts and other actors in parenting support as well as in relation to the type of project (intervention or prevention).

According to positioning theory scholars, positioning always takes place within the context of a specific moral order of speaking, which is particularly evident when the positioning of others occurs (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999: 27). This notion is also important, since parents are indeed positioned by others within family support projects – that is, the architects of parenting support projects position parents. Therefore, understanding the specific moral order of speaking about parenting is important.

In addition to positioning theory, this article applies analytical tools, such as 'pragmatic modalities' developed within semiotic sociology (Sulkunen and Törrönen, 1997b) to analyse the subject positions of parents within family support projects. Pragmatism here refers to the regulation of parental actions expressing how actions are guided by cultural values (Törrönen and Maunu, 2007: 367). The formulations of semiotic sociology rely on the heuristic device from 'the actantial model' originally developed by A. J. Greimas (1980).

The way in which the subject position of parents is associated with specific kinds of values can be traced by examining how parenting is valued through the application of pragmatic modalities (Törrönen, 2001: 321; Autto and Törrönen, 2017). As such, Sulkunen and Törrönen (1997b) have identified at least four different pragmatic modalities: obligations (responsibilities), desires (motivations), abilities (physical and material resources) and competence (knowledge-related resources). In this article, two of these pragmatic modalities are analysed more closely: obligations and competence. I found analysing these pragmatic modalities useful in the context of parenting support, since the modalities specify how the subject position of parents differs in terms of whether and how parents deal with two attributes often associated with good parenting: namely, obligations (hereafter responsibilities) or competence. In the next section, I further analyse how these pragmatic modalities serve as analytical tools.

## Data and methods

This study analyses documents from 310 family support projects implemented between 2000 and 2010. Parenting support first appeared in government platforms in the late

1990s, and has since been the focus of family policy in Finland (Sihvonen, forthcoming). Along with increasing political attention towards parenting, a plethora of development projects in social policy – derived from influential national development programmes – emerged around family and parenting issues. The data analysed draws on various project documents, consists of funding applications (n = 51), midterm and final reports (n = 128), other publications (n = 91) and other project documents (n = 126). A mention of ‘parenting support’ in a project document was the main criteria for selecting the project document for further analysis. A multiplicity of developing projects initially interested me, since they introduced parenting support as an underdeveloped and specific sphere of family support. According to the family support projects and the wider political programmes to which they related, something related to parenting requires support. However, this particularity is not explicitly formulated or discussed in the data, necessitating a more detailed analysis. The projects analysed were implemented by public organisations (51 per cent of the projects in the dataset), primarily carried out by municipal departments focused on social and health care as well as education. In addition, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (49 per cent of the projects in the dataset) funded by Finland’s Slot Machine Organisation (RAY) primarily focused on the well-being of families, parents and children.

It is important to note that project workers produced the project documents analysed in this study for specific situations. Typically, these situations included administrative purposes, for professionals working in the field of family support or for actors from participating organisations as well as for those funding projects. The texts are defined by these particular methods of production and manner of representation (Atkinson and Coffey, 1998; Prior, 2003).

The study described here relies on qualitative text analysis of project documents. First, the family projects were classified based on their orientation as prevention projects (68 per cent) or intervention projects (32 per cent). Prevention projects aimed to develop parenting support techniques to prevent future problems. By contrast, intervention projects aimed to support parenting in problematic life situations; families in intervention projects consisted of those within child protective services and experiencing immediate, urgent and serious problems, such as mental health issues or substance misuse. Next, a thematic analysis was carried out consisting of open coding, axial coding and selected coding phases (Bowen, 2009; Wesley, 2014).<sup>2</sup> Third, two main approaches to project activities were identified from the project documents: an individualised parenting support approach and a communal parenting support approach. Within the individualised approach, parenting is understood as a social problem interpreted as a problem of intimate family relations. By contrast, the communal parenting support approach is based upon a wider scope of social relationships within a community and targeted to increase an overall ‘sense of community’ within Finnish society.

A difference appears to exist between the project orientations (intervention or prevention) and how the approaches (individualised or communal) appeared in discussions about responsible and competent parenting in the data. Therefore, responsibility and competence as pragmatic modalities are analysed within the framework of these two different orientation categories as well as within the framework of the two parenting support approaches. Table 1 illustrates how the subject positions of the parents as responsible and competent are analysed within the two categories (intervention and prevention) and approaches (communal and individualised).

Table 1 Analytical components of the subject positions

	Individualised parenting support approach	Communal parenting support approach
Intervention projects	Subject position of responsible and competent parents	Subject position of responsible and competent parents
Prevention projects	Subject position of responsible and competent parents	Subject position of responsible and competent parents

The modal qualities – that is, responsibility and competence – are studied in further detail in the following sections.

### Parenting as responsibility

The theme of parents as responsible for their child(ren)'s well-being is highlighted throughout the project documents. Responsibility appears as the most important quality and characteristic closely related to good parenthood (cf. Widding, 2018). However, positioning parents as responsible adults emerges differently depending on if the projects adopt the individualised or communal approach. In what follows, I analyse the positioning of parents as responsible, first, within individualised parenting support approach and, second, within the communal parenting support approach.

#### *Positioning parents in the individualised parenting support approach: exclusive responsibilities*

In many respects, responsibility appears indivisible, suggesting that responsibility is understood as something that cannot be shared with other adults or institutions. The indivisibility of responsibility is particularly prominent when projects adopt the individualised parenting support approach. The presupposition of indivisible responsibility is actually legitimised in the Finnish Child Welfare Act: 'The primary responsibility for a child's well-being rests with the child's parents and other custodians' (Child Welfare Act, 2007). This primary idea from the Child Welfare Act is frequently referenced, in particular, by intervention projects. For instance, the primary responsibility of the parents is emphasised in an intervention project aimed at 'families at risk' for many reasons, varying from unemployment to drug and alcohol misuse that negatively influence children's well-being. As such, parents are supported to take responsibility for their children and to fulfil their duty as responsible parents in order to enhance the well-being of their children. 'The principle idea of the project is to guide parents towards responsible parenthood and good childhood' (Project 79, intervention).<sup>3</sup>

In addition, parents' responsibilities are highlighted in the following extract from the final report of an intervention project aimed at developing parenting support in child protective services. Whilst describing parenting-related problems in the city, the author(s) referred to a statement made by the manager of a local child welfare services office. The extract illustrates how irresponsible parents, especially young parents, have hopes aimed



at themselves – that is, their own self-interests – not towards their children, as preferred by the project staff. The positioning of parents occurs by utilising moralistic means:

[The manager of the child welfare services] took a stand on the recent increase in child protection cases, stating that the problems [in the city] are similar to those in other big cities: substance misuse issues, mental health problems and parental irresponsibility. [The manager] pinpointed that parenting is not strong enough, and parents do not dare set boundaries with their child(ren). According to [the manager], young parents want to take time for themselves, whereby the consequences became apparent in the increasing number of child custody cases (Project 45, intervention).

This intervention project followed the individualised parenting support approach, whereby responsibilities are exclusively indivisible. Intervention projects utilising an individualised approach construct obligatory responsibilities for parents who no longer understand their parental duties and construct a subject position of the responsible parent whose duties as parent are indivisible.

Responsibility is a crucial modal quality related to the subject position of parents. This also applies to prevention projects. However, when prevention projects adopt an individualised approach, parents' responsibilities are highlighted in relation to the responsibilities of the professional education authorities, such as within early education and day care. For instance, a project aimed at establishing a cooperative model for parents and professionals in the field of day care, referred to as 'the educational partnership' (in Finnish, *kasvatuskumppanuus*), specifically separates the responsibilities of professionals and parents: 'Both parents and professionals are interested in children's development, but parental responsibility is around the clock' (Project 186, prevention). That is, professionals as well as parents are positioned as interested in and motivated by children's well-being, although an obligatory responsibility is exclusively constructed for parents, whose essential responsibility is emphasised in projects following an individualised parenting support approach. 'Parenting support lies at the heart of preventive family work; experts and local authorities cannot take over tasks pertaining to the duties of parents' (Project 3, prevention). Thus, prevention projects also construct obligatory responsibilities for parents, which are indivisible and explicitly differentiated from those constructed by and for authorities.

*Positioning parents in the communal parenting support approach: inclusive responsibilities*

Parenting responsibilities are, however, indivisible only when intervention and prevention projects follow an individualised parenting support approach. That is, when adopting a communal parenting support approach, parenting responsibilities become divisible. For example, in the following extract, an intervention project aimed at supporting parenting when parents suffer mental health problems adopts the communal approach and emphasises the shared nature of parental responsibilities:

Quite often, the social networks of these families are very thin, and the families are isolated. From the child(ren)'s perspective, a lack of discussion about the mental health problems [of the parents] might lead to even bigger problems. A social network represents a bridge from an intimate family to society. All adults within the child's intimate circle can help those children to

understand as well as harmonise everyday life and help that child reach its stage of development (Project 73, intervention).

Of particular note here, in order to share parental responsibilities, the child's (or family's) existing intimate circle is emphasised in intervention projects that adopt a communal parenting support approach. In general, a communal approach appears to represent a rather tiny slice within intervention projects.

By contrast, in prevention projects a communal approach strongly emerges. Furthermore, when prevention projects follow a communal approach, the subject position of parents is constructed differently compared to intervention projects. For instance, one project arouses community concern over children and specifies the position of the parents as follows: 'The aim is to support adults to realise and take responsibility, not only for their own children, but also realise and take responsibility for the neighbours' children' (Project 16, prevention). Thus, projects construct an obligatory responsibility for parents, not only towards their own children but towards all children in the surrounding community. The author(s) of the reports analysed here pinpoint how parents no longer understand their communal parenting responsibilities and, therefore, need to reconsider their duties towards the community. In fact, one of the projects specifically focuses on developing practices to ensure the divisibility of responsibilities for children and youth with the surrounding community: 'The goal of the project was to develop a locally and communally produced model for intergenerational practices to apply in different environments – that is, voluntary workers, parents and professionals share responsibility for the well-being of children and youth' (Project, 299, prevention).

### **Competence in parenting**

The other common modality – competence – arises as a natural component of responsibility. Responsibility for parenting assumes competence in parenting. As such, positioning parents as competent in parenting is performed differently through individualised and communal parenting support, which I analyse separately in the following sections.

#### *Positioning parents in the individualised parenting support: knowledge provided by experts versus parents' own expertise*

A connection between responsibility and competence is particularly evident within intervention projects, where parents are often seen as irresponsible and appear to lack competence in parenting. For example, the architect(s) of an intervention project focused on mothers experiencing alcohol dependency characterised mothers as incompetent vis-à-vis interacting improperly with their children.<sup>4</sup> Through a specific guidebook and support providing specialist information about child development based on psychological knowledge such as the theory of attachment, parents were helped to overcome tasks and become competent parents with the necessary parenting skills:

After childbirth, everyday parenting is supported. The interaction between a mother and a child is evaluated by filming interactions, such as playing and caring. The aim is to strengthen mothers' competence to take into account the baby's experience during interactions and to



bear the child in her mind . . . The guidebook [*Small Steps*] helps parents to understand child development, while also helping them to prepare for the next step and to respond to those steps in a way that supports child development (Project 241, intervention).

Incompetence amongst parents relates to the parent–child relationship. This type of subject position amongst parents is typical in intervention projects adopting an individualised parenting support approach: the parent’s interactional competence with the child represents the most important attribute of parental competence. Moreover, exclusive knowledge provided by professional parenting experts – in particular, developmental psychological knowledge – is highlighted within the intervention.

However, differences exist in terms of constructing the subject position of a competent parent within intervention and prevention projects. When prevention projects adopt an individualised approach, parental competence is highlighted, emphasising the parent’s own expertise. For example, a handbook for employees working with children and produced by one prevention project begins as follows: ‘Parents are always the best experts regarding their own children’ (Project 240, prevention). Thus, when the parent’s own expertise is mentioned within preventive family support projects, parents are positioned as competent vis-à-vis parenting activities. For example, the author(s) of one prevention project, aimed at producing tools for parenting support such as specific forms for family social workers, quite carefully discussed taking great pains to not disturb the competent subject position of parents. That is, parents are positioned as competent participants and their expertise should be respected: ‘Using the form [introduced by the project], it is possible to think through family problems and prepare to meet the parents in an open dialogue that respects the parents’ expertise’ (Project 240, prevention). In addition, the reformulation of expert hierarchies becomes apparent in the following extract from a prevention project that emphasises the expertise of parents:

Multi-expertise is different from multi-professionalism given that multi-expertise indicates sharing knowledge and power with non-professionals. For example, customers, families and support persons are granted the role of expert. Moving towards multi-expertise requires encouragement to yield one’s [the professional’s] own expertise to the shared arena to be communally discussed (Project 279, prevention).

Those preventive family support projects adopting an individualised parenting support approach construct a subject position for parents as competent experts by challenging and changing established hierarchies between families and professional experts. In this way, the knowledge of parents and professional experts is considered equally important: ‘Support is conducted in close co-operation with a family; a family worker brings in professional competence and a family brings in expertise from their own life’ (Project 155, prevention).

*Positioning parents in the communal parenting support approach: parental competence reinforced in peer relations*

When positioning parents as competent or incompetent carers of their children, only a few intervention projects applied a communal approach, whereby the meaning of peer support was specifically highlighted. Although intervention projects mention the

importance of peer support, it does not emerge as a vividly discussed topic within this dataset. For example, in one project already mentioned in the previous section, peer support is highlighted as an important method of assisting at-risk families:

Peer support represents an important element in the process and parents' peer relationships are actively supported. . . . Group activities provide an opportunity for parents to learn something new about their own children while children gain opportunities to learn something new about their parents (Project 79, intervention).

As the extract above indicates, although peer support is mentioned as a significant target to develop within project activities, the author here actually highlights the significance of family interaction – that is, the interaction between family members – while the interaction between families participating in peer groups is not emphasised. Thus, whilst the significance of peer support is recognised by intervention projects, the parent–child (or mother–child) relationship remains crucial, overshadowing relations with peer parents.

In contrast, preventive family support projects vigorously adopted a communal parenting support approach. Using the communal approach highlights peer relationships between parents within the community. This discourse also relies upon parents' competence and expertise regarding their own life. For instance, the project staff from one initiative aimed at developing peer groups for fathers to provide parenting support after divorce indicated the following: 'Fathers are the experts regarding their own life' (Project 296, prevention). That is, fathers represent competent experts regarding their lives and parenting, whereas '[. . .] professional instructors simply enable conversations within peer groups' (Project 296, prevention). The discourse within preventive family support projects adopting a communal approach suggests that knowledge, experiences and competence become shareable. This was also the case in a peer support project for divorced fathers: 'In particular, they [fathers] highlighted their relief resulting from the sharing of common experiences' (Project 296, prevention).

Therefore, a communal parenting support approach and peer-parenting support rely upon parents' own expertise and knowledge which is shared with other parents within the community as described in one preventive project: 'In peer groups, parents' expertise based on experience is emphasised, where parents get to know each other, discuss and learn together' (Project 23, prevention). An understanding of parenting knowledge as sharable and parents as competent is further developed in some prevention projects that adopt a communal approach:

[In the project], support is examined from the point of view of families – that is, from the grassroots level. However, all people affecting children's lives are challenged to cooperate. . . . The most important principles consist of the participation of people and the community as well as the expertise arising from everyday life. [In the project], problems typically considered individual problems are reformulated as something to solve communally assisted by the community, as well as through interaction, cooperation and reciprocal trust (Project 2, prevention).

In this extract from an influential nation-wide project, parents took a subject position as competent parents by relying on the knowledge and experiences of the entire surrounding community in parenting-related issues.

## Conclusions

In this article, I explored how parents within family support projects are positioned as responsible and competent parents. Inspired by the positioning theory (Harré and Langenhove, 1999) and the ideas surrounding responsibility and competence as pragmatic modalities (Sulkunen and Törrönen, 1997b), I focused attention on the relational and dynamic aspects of parents' positions as responsible and competent in parenting. The subject positions of responsible and competent parents were analysed in relation to other actors in family support projects, such as professional parenting experts, children and peer-parents. In addition, I examined whether the discourse followed an individualised or communal parenting support approach. Moreover, the subject positions of parents were empirically studied and interpreted within two different orientation categories, namely, intervention and prevention projects.

The analysis here outlines how parents' responsibilities and competence are differently constructed within the categories of intervention and prevention projects adhering to different approaches (individualised or communal). Furthermore, my analysis outlines how the subject positions of parents as responsible and competent actors are differently and uniquely constructed in relation to other actors in the family support projects, most importantly in relation to parenting experts, peer-to-peer relationships and children.

Given that prevention projects follow an individualised approach, the subject position of parents as responsible as well as competent parents is explicitly constructed in relation to the subject position of professional family experts. First, the subject position of parents contains unique and indivisible responsibilities, which are clearly differentiated from those related to professional family experts. Second, parents are thought of as competent experts in parenting-related issues to such an extent that efforts aim to dissipate the hierarchies between parents as experts and professional parenting experts. Furthermore, parental competence is reinforced as knowledge is shared with peers in the surrounding community.

These findings are particularly interesting given the results from multiple other studies (e.g. Faircloth *et al.*, 2013a; Lee *et al.*, 2014) that emphasise the role and impact of parenting experts. My findings indicate that, at least in Finnish parenting support discussions, expertise stemming from the parents' own experience as well as horizontal expertise – that is, expertise shared amongst peer parents within a community – is simultaneously highlighted alongside professional expertise. However, these observations are only valid within prevention projects.

In contrast to prevention projects, in intervention projects the subject position of parents is not constructed in relation to the responsibilities of other childcare institutions. Within intervention projects, the subject position of competent parents specifically relates to the parent–child interaction wherein the particular knowledge of the professional experts is needed. As a whole, parenting is understood as an exclusive task of parents, not something strengthened by the broader communal context.

To conclude, increased discussions about parental responsibilities as well as their competence as parents became legitimate through the recent paradigm shift in state policy influenced by neoliberal politics (e.g. Heiskala, 2006). In family policy, structural changes in the welfare state are not highlighted as much as the responsibilities of the individuals and their immediate communities. However, contrary to studies conducted in other parts

of Europe (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2014), expertise is not solely allocated to professional experts. But, in prevention projects in particular, expertise stemming from individual experience and knowledge as well as horizontal expertise and responsibilities constructed in peer-to-peer relationships are highlighted.

## Notes

1 Some scholars have pointed out that these changes in the welfare state policy took place as early as the 1980s (Alasuutari, 1996; Julkunen, 2001), although it is evident that the economic recession in the 1990s accelerated restructuring (e.g. Bardy *et al.*, 2001).

2 A more detailed description of the coding process appears elsewhere (Sihvonen, forthcoming).

3 Numbering was applied to anonymise the projects.

4 Many scholars focused on the gendered use of parenting support (e.g. Daly, 2013b; Gíslason and Símonardóttir, 2018). However, while such remarks are highly important, it is not possible to analyse the gendered nature of parenting support in this article.

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