



How involuntary child removal shapes parents' everyday lives: implications for child welfare practice

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how involuntary child removal affects parents' everyday lives and what implications this may have for child welfare practice. While practice and policy primarily focus on children's safety and development, less attention has been given to how removal impacts parents' ability to cope, maintain relationships, and participate in follow-up. The study is based on qualitative interviews with ten parents whose children were in public care at the time of data collection. A thematic, inductive analysis identified two interrelated themes: (1) strained relationships with child welfare services, and (2) emotional and social burdens in everyday life.

The findings illustrate how child removal affects parents not merely as a legal intervention, but as a profound rupture that destabilises key dimensions of everyday life. Strained relationships with child welfare services, marked by limited dialogue, perceived misrecognition, and asymmetrical power, contributed to a persistent sense of marginalisation. Rather than serving as a source of support, the service was often experienced as distant, unresponsive, or even harmful. This shaped how parents positioned themselves in relation to the system, alternating between guarded compliance and protective withdrawal. The removal also triggered broader emotional and social dislocation. Parents described how shame, grief, and fear of stigmatisation led to self-silencing, withdrawal, and a redefinition of roles and relationships. What was disrupted was not only the practical caregiving role, but the parent's self-understanding and social recognition as a caregiver. Implications for child welfare practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

This study explores how involuntary child removal affects parents' everyday lives in the aftermath of the intervention. Involuntary child removal represents one of the most intrusive measures available to child welfare systems. While such interventions are intended to protect children from serious harm, they also produce significant and enduring consequences for the parents involved. In the Norwegian child welfare system, the state may intervene by transferring legal custody to public authorities when a child is considered to be living under conditions that seriously endanger their health or development (Child Welfare Act, § 5–1). At the end of 2024, 10,250 children were placed outside their parental homes through child welfare interventions, of whom 63 per cent (6,402 children) were placed in public care following such orders (Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs, 2025). However, no corresponding statistics exist regarding the number of

parents affected, the forms of follow-up provided, or how parents' everyday lives evolve following removal. Existing policy and practice frameworks have primarily focused on safeguarding the child's safety and development. At the same time, the longer-term implications for parents' living conditions and capacity for continued parental involvement have received comparatively limited attention (Gerdts-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025).

Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) protects the right to respect for family life. In the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR, 2025), this right has been interpreted as encompassing not only the legal bond between parents and children, but also the mutual enjoyment of each other's company as an essential part of family life (ECtHR, 2025). This interpretation underscores the state's obligation to ensure that separation does not undermine the emotional and relational bonds between children and their parents. The right to family life thus entails a positive duty not only to

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justify interference, but also to actively facilitate the restoration and maintenance of meaningful family relations wherever possible (Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Healy et al., 2023). This includes recognising that contact and connection are not solely matters of physical presence but of emotional quality and continuity (Thomson & Thorpe, 2003). Norwegian child welfare legislation reflects these international human rights obligations. The Child Welfare Act stipulates that child welfare services must, as far as possible, cooperate with parents after a care order has been issued and facilitate reunification when this is not contrary to the child's best interests (Child Welfare Act, §§ 1–9 and 5–7). In addition, services are mandated to follow up parents through guidance and support, including assistance in accessing other relevant services (Child Welfare Act, § 8–3). This duty is interpreted as a positive obligation requiring the child welfare service to take initiative, maintain contact, and provide systematic follow-up without waiting for parents to request support (Supreme Court of Norway, 2020).

The statutory purpose of this follow-up is threefold: to support parents during a difficult period, to ensure that decisions remain based on current and accurate information, and to implement necessary measures for reunification where this remains a realistic option (Stang, 2024). Moreover, child welfare services are expected to provide parents with regular updates about the child's development in care and to initiate dialogue about potential support needs and relevant referrals (Ministry of Children and Families, 2017). These responsibilities constitute a legal and professional framework for maintaining parents' connection to their children and enabling meaningful participation in their children's lives after removal.

1.1. Previous research

Previous studies have shown that parents' everyday lives after a care order are shaped by multiple and intersecting challenges, including financial hardship, housing instability, limited social networks, substance use, exposure to violence, and long-term health issues (Bywaters et al., 2020; Ellingsen et al., 2018; Johansen et al., 2022; Kojan & Storhaug, 2021; Stang et al., 2023). These difficulties are not only structural but also deeply personal, as research drawing on parents' accounts has described the aftermath of removal as marked by emotional crisis, grief, shame, and social withdrawal (Eriksen, 2024; Haight et al., 2017; Kenny & Barrington, 2018; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025; Olkowska & Aamodt, 2022; Otterlei et al., 2021; Aamodt & Olkowska, 2023). Some parents also report deteriorating health and a fragmented sense of themselves as caregivers (Eriksen, 2024; Suomi et al., 2023; Syrstad, 2020), and in some cases, increased substance use, depression, or suicidal ideation (Haight et al., 2017; Janzen & Melrose, 2017; Kenny & Barrington, 2018; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025; Memarnia et al., 2015). Grief following removal has been conceptualised as both *ambiguous* and *disenfranchised*, referring to the unique pain of losing a child who is still alive, yet being denied recognition or legitimacy in the grieving process (Boss, 2006; Doka, 2002; Janzen & Melrose, 2017; Schofield et al., 2011).

A recurring theme in the literature concerns how parents experience their relationship with child welfare services after the removal. Several studies characterise these interactions as marked by power asymmetries, emotional strain, and a lack of trust (Kenny & Barrington, 2018; Otterlei, 2022; Otterlei & Engebretsen, 2021; Slettebø, 2008; Syrstad & Slettebø, 2020). The dual role of child welfare services, as both support providers and decision-making authorities, is often perceived as difficult to navigate (Schofield et al., 2011; Syrstad & Ness, 2021). When parents disagree with or do not fully understand the rationale for the removal, this may lead to confusion, withdrawal, or compliance without a sense of direction (Ellingsen, 2007; Otterlei et al., 2021; Olkowska & Aamodt, 2022; Syrstad & Ness, 2021). Lack of respect, limited support, and unrealistic expectations in follow-up are frequently reported, and some parents describe these interactions as re-traumatising (Haight et al., 2017; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025; Memarnia et al., 2015; Syrstad &

Slettebø, 2020; Wissö et al., 2024). In parallel, research on post-removal family relationships has explored how contact is arranged, maintained, and assessed, with a primary focus on visitation, placement stability, and reunification processes (Bernedo & González-Pasarín, 2024; Burtch et al., 2024; Revheim et al., 2025; Wissö et al., 2024). Several studies emphasise that parental involvement also depends on access to relevant information about the child's development and everyday life (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2013; Gerds-Andresen et al., 2024). Consistent and transparent communication is considered vital for sustaining emotional connection and parental identity (Morrison, 2015), whereas a lack of information may contribute to distress,

marginalisation, and uncertainty (Eriksen, 2024; Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Suomi et al., 2023; Tembo & Studsrød, 2018; Aamodt & Olkowska, 2023). Studies have also pointed to wide variation in how such information is shared, shaped by professional discretion, organisational routines, and institutional structures (Eriksen, 2024; Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Otterlei & Engebretsen, 2021; Berrick et al., 2016). Parents frequently report delays, inconsistencies, or overly formal communication practices that limit relational continuity and complicate collaboration (Memarnia et al., 2015; Balsells et al., 2014; Syrstad & Slettebø, 2020).

While previous research has documented the emotional, relational, and psychosocial consequences of child removal, including grief, stigma, marginalisation, and strained relationships with child welfare services, less attention has been paid to how these experiences unfold in the context of everyday life. There is still limited knowledge about how such experiences shape, and are shaped by, parents' ongoing encounters with the child welfare system. Recent studies have called for more research into these long-term dynamics, particularly how institutional relationships and lack of follow-up affect parents' lives beyond the initial intervention (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025). Contributing to this growing body of research, the study is guided by the following research question: How does involuntary child removal affect parents' everyday lives in the aftermath of the intervention?

1.2. Conceptualising parents' everyday life

Building on previous research that highlights the emotional and relational strain parents face after a care order (e.g., Eriksen, 2024; Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025), this study explores how the removal of their child shapes parents' everyday lives. In this context, 'everyday life' refers to the broader ways in which life is affected following the loss of care responsibility. Drawing on understandings of everyday life as the sphere in which social relations, routines, and ordinary practices are lived and made meaningful (Gullestad, 1992), everyday life is used here to examine how the consequences of child removal become embedded in the contexts in which parents seek to maintain relationships, interpret their situation, and sustain a sense of self and belonging. To analyse these experiences, the study draws on Antonovsky's Sense of Coherence (SOC; 1987; 2012) and Honneth's theory of recognition (2008), which provide conceptual tools for understanding how various aspects of life are disrupted, challenged, or sustained following child removal. Antonovsky (1987, 2012) developed the SOC concept to explain how individuals cope with stress and life challenges through three interrelated dimensions: *comprehensibility*, *manageability*, and *meaningfulness*. Comprehensibility refers to the extent to which life is perceived as structured and predictable, fostering a sense of control and stability (Moksnes, 2021). Manageability involves the belief that one has access to adequate resources, personal, relational, or institutional, to meet the demands of the situation, thereby supporting better stress management and reducing the risk of health problems (Antonovsky, 2012). Meaningfulness reflects the degree to which life is experienced as purposeful and valuable, motivating individuals to engage with difficult situations as opportunities for growth (Høgsted, 2023; Kristensen et al., 2021). Together, these dimensions contribute to a strengthened capacity for responding to adversity in a

health-promoting way (Vinje et al., 2017; Lindström & Eriksson, 2015). When the sense of coherence is weakened, due to a lack of clarity, limited support, or a mismatch between demands and resources, coping may be compromised and emotional strain intensified (Lindström & Eriksson, 2015). In such circumstances, the quality of relational experiences can become particularly important.

Honneth's (2008) theory of recognition offers a complementary lens for analysing how relational dynamics affect parents' self-understanding and sense of worth in the aftermath of child removal. The theory identifies three forms of recognition: *love*, *rights*, and *solidarity*, as essential to human well-being. Love refers to close, affective relationships that foster emotional security and self-confidence. Rights concern recognition as a legal and political subject, while solidarity concerns recognition by the broader community for one's contributions and unique qualities. A lack of recognition in any of these domains can lead to humiliation, marginalisation, and diminished self-esteem (Honneth, 2008). These processes can also be understood through the concept of *toxic shame*, described by Farstad (2020) as a deep-seated feeling of personal deficiency often triggered by trauma or social stigma. Such shame reinforces perceptions of exclusion and unworthiness, and may further erode parents' capacity to engage with others or seek support.

2. Method

The study is based on qualitative interviews with ten parents, who together had nineteen children placed in public care following involuntary care orders. The aim was to examine how the involuntary care order had shaped the parents' everyday lives. Participants were recruited through municipal child welfare services in different parts of Norway. As the public authority responsible for following up with parents after care orders are issued, the municipal child welfare service was considered the most relevant route to reach parents with direct experience of the phenomenon under study. The child welfare services were asked to forward written information about the study to parents who had experienced an involuntary care order and whose children were still in public care at the time of recruitment. The information letter stated that interviews could be conducted in the participant's preferred language. This ensured that potential participants received information through an established institutional contact point, while the researchers did not receive identifiable information before parents had consented to participate.

The participating parents' children were newborn to four years old at the time they were placed in public care. At the time of the interviews, the children were between one and seventeen years old. The duration of the placements ranged from 12 months to 13 years, with a median of 5 years. Two children, who were siblings, were placed in kinship foster care, while the remaining children were placed in non-kinship foster homes. All parents reported *emotional neglect* as the stated reason for the care order. This finding aligns with Gerdtz-Andresen's (2021) analysis of Norwegian care orders, in which deficiencies in personal contact and security formed a central basis in the majority of decisions. In follow-up questions, nine parents emphasised that the care removal was not related to substance use, violence, or practical caregiving deficiencies. One parent described domestic violence in the home as the reason for reduced caregiving capacity. None of the parents had consented to the care order.

2.1. Data collection and analysis

In the interviews, parents were invited to share their experiences of life after the care order, beginning with the day their child was removed and reflecting freely on how life had unfolded up to the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in late autumn 2023. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian. The interviews were narratively oriented (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) and organised around broad thematic areas, such as life situation, health, everyday life, family life,

and changes following the care order. The focus was on each parent's individual experiences and perspectives, and most follow-up questions were formulated during the interviews, based on the themes raised by the parents themselves. Follow-up questions addressed the parents' perceived need for support, their contact with the child, interactions with child welfare services, and other actors involved. All questions sought to explore how these experiences were perceived to affect the parents' everyday lives. The interviews ranged from 35 min to 2.5 h, with an average of 1.5 h. One interview was conducted over two sessions, following the participant's initiative to schedule a second meeting to provide further reflections.

A reflexive thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2021), was used to explore how parents described their everyday lives after the involuntary removal of their child. The analysis began with repeated readings of the transcripts to become familiar with the material and to note preliminary impressions. The transcripts were then coded inductively, with attention to recurring meanings and experiences in the parents' accounts. The coding was conducted by two researchers, and preliminary codes and interpretations were discussed throughout the analytic process to support reflexive engagement with the material and the development of analytically coherent themes. In the first phase, codes remained close to the participants' descriptions, such as 'not receiving information', 'not understanding what happens next', 'being afraid to complain', 'shame', and 'withdrawing from others'. These codes were then compared across interviews and organised into broader patterns of meaning. For example, codes concerning lack of information, unclear professional reasoning, fear of speaking up, and experiences of not being acknowledged were brought together as they pointed to a shared pattern of weakened trust and strained collaboration with child welfare services. Similarly, codes concerning grief, shame, social withdrawal, uncertainty about the child's everyday life, and loss of parental identity were brought together as they reflected emotional and social burdens that shaped parents' everyday lives after the care order. Through this process of moving back and forth among coded extracts, preliminary patterns, and the full dataset, two overarching themes emerged.

2.2. Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT; reference number *anonymised for blinded review*) and conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research in the social sciences and humanities (NESH). Participation was based on informed consent. Parents who have been subjected to involuntary care orders are considered a vulnerable group, both due to the intervention itself and to the potential emotional strain involved in revisiting their experiences (Dalen, 2011; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025; Olkowska & Aamodt, 2022). The research process was therefore designed to prioritise participants' safety, autonomy, and emotional well-being. They were informed about the purpose of the study, data handling, and anonymisation, and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Available support services were mentioned at the beginning and end of each interview.

3. Findings

The thematic analysis identified two interrelated themes that capture how parents experienced their everyday lives following an involuntary care order: (1) weakened trust and strained collaboration with child welfare services, and (2) emotional distress and burdens in everyday life.

3.1. Weakened trust and strained collaboration with child welfare services

A central way in which parents' lives were affected after the care order was their experience of being marginalised or excluded by child welfare services. Their accounts describe how a lack of information,

limited involvement, and mistrust shaped their sense of control, visibility, and participation in their child's life, and, by extension, in their own everyday life. One of the first aspects highlighted by several parents concerned the lack of information needed to gain an overview of the process following the care order. They described receiving no updates about their child's situation and no explanation of what would happen next. As one parent put it, 'There was nothing.'

The initial period after the removal was, for several parents, marked by what they described as a lack of information:

I didn't understand anything at all about what was happening [...] I hadn't received any information beforehand, and got very little afterwards. I should have been told where to turn, what was going to happen, and what they were thinking. There were no meetings, no information about how I could get help, what was coming next, or whether I would even get any support. [parent 1]

I was in shock. Even if you think it might happen, you're never prepared. And then ... nothing. I got no answers [...] there should have been a place I could go with all the questions I had. [parent 8]

As the excerpts illustrate, the lack of information undermined parents' ability to understand what was happening and how to respond. Several described being left without direction, clarity, or any form of support from child welfare services. This uncertainty also shaped everyday life after the removal, as parents were left unsure where to turn, what would happen next, whether support would be provided, and how they were expected to continue as parents without daily care responsibility. The lack of basic communication contributed to a growing sense of mistrust and disconnection from those responsible for follow-up after the removal.

Several parents also described how the absence of clarification affected their broader life situation. Rather than being limited to uncertainty about the case itself, the situation was described as spilling into everyday life as doubt, exhaustion, and difficulty knowing how to move forward:

Some days I feel like giving up, you know. You start to doubt yourself [...] everything feels very uncertain [...] hopefully I'll get some help from NAV [the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration] now, or at least some clarification, so I don't have to stay in this limbo, because it's completely overwhelming, to put it mildly [...] it's a life crisis. [Parent 7]

The situation was described as an acute life crisis, in which parents felt unable to make sense of what was happening in both their own lives and their children's. For some parents, this lack of clarity was also linked to the way professional assessments and decisions were communicated:

I never get any professional assessment. I wish there were someone who could actually explain the professional reasoning behind their decisions, because that [the way the child welfare service talks], that language isn't mine. [parent 4]

Several parents described difficulties in accessing the professional reasoning behind decisions. Rather than enabling dialogue or clarification, the way decisions were communicated often contributed to further confusion and exclusion. Parents were not only asking to be informed about decisions, but to understand the grounds on which decisions were made and what these implied for their continued parental role. For many, the lack of accessible explanations compounded their sense of marginalisation from a process that deeply affected their everyday lives.

A second point that emerged was the experience of receiving little or no support in the initial period after the child had been removed:

We didn't get any help, neither the kids nor us [...] They could have sent in a crisis team, I think, because that's not something parents should have to seek out themselves, like: go to the family counselling office. That's what we were told: that they had psychologists there. But you don't do that, not in a moment like that. Looking back now, I was completely... You don't know up from down. [Parent 6]

I felt completely overlooked, as if I didn't matter in the process. [parent 2]

These descriptions show how the absence of active follow-up from child welfare services contributed to parents' sense of being left alone in a situation that required professional guidance and care. Rather than feeling supported in a time of crisis, they felt unrecognised, which reinforced the impression of being sidelined. In this context, trust was further weakened, and parents' ability to maintain a meaningful position in the aftermath of the removal was compromised, leaving them uncertain, unsupported, and disconnected from decisions that shaped their everyday lives. Parents thus described a situation in which the need for support was greatest at the very moment when their capacity to identify, request, and mobilise such support was most weakened.

A further pattern that emerged was that some parents actively avoided contact with child welfare services following the care order. This was not described as indifference or lack of interest, but as a protective response to feeling hurt, overlooked, or misinterpreted. Several parents described how continued interaction with the service felt meaningless or even harmful in light of how they had been treated:

I was sick of the whole child welfare service, so I didn't really want to hear anything from them. I thought: the ones who hurt me are definitely not the ones who should be helping me with anything [...] I needed someone who could talk to me about what I had been through. Someone who knew how I was feeling. Someone who could say: okay, now you're angry, now you're sad, now everything's shit, and actually help me understand: what am I really going through? [Parent 9]

I didn't want a follow-up from the child welfare service, because it felt meaningless. I would rather have had a crisis team come to my house, to be honest. [parent 8]

Several parents also emphasised the need for emotional support in the period following the care order. While they expressed a desire for help processing their experiences, they did not feel this need was acknowledged or met when child welfare services were expected to provide it. Instead, the service was often perceived as part of the problem rather than a source of support. This contributed to parents seeking help outside the system and to their further distancing from those responsible for follow-up. This distancing was described less as withdrawal from the child than as a way of managing vulnerability in relation to a service the parents no longer trusted as a source of help.

Several parents in this study also described experiencing a positioning and communication style from child welfare services that made it difficult to establish or maintain a collaborative relationship. Their descriptions of conflict-ridden interactions revealed another dimension of how trust and collaboration were weakened in the aftermath of the care order:

I ended up in a very conflictual relationship with the child welfare staff involved in the removal [...] every single contact I've had with child welfare service [after the removal] ends in conflict [...] I feel they're extremely uncooperative [...] and all those conflicts have been used against me [...] that I was aggressive and unstable ... well, of course I was, when they took my child. But I wasn't like that before [the removal]. That wasn't the reason for the removal. [parent 1]

Several parents described a clear connection between repeated conflict and a deepening lack of trust in child welfare services. As the excerpt illustrates, conflict was described not only as a breakdown in collaboration but also as something that could be turned back on the parent. Emotional reactions to the removal were reinterpreted as signs of instability rather than as responses to an extreme situation. This made subsequent contact with the service difficult, as attempts to explain or defend oneself could be perceived as confirming the very descriptions the parent had contested.

Some parents described feeling afraid to express emotion in meetings with child welfare services:

They considered calling the police on me because when they told me about the care order, I slammed the table and left in anger. Of course, I reacted! You've just told me you're taking my child [...] It was almost like they expected me to be happy and grateful, and everything was going to be rainbows and pink skies, with a unicorn riding across that rainbow ... that's what it felt like. So it's been hard, because no matter what I do, it's not enough [...] it's never enough. [Parent 5]

This quote illustrates how some parents expressed deep frustration with the lack of understanding shown by child welfare services toward their emotional reactions, such as anger, despair, or helplessness. The frustration was not only about the emotional toll of the situation, but also about the perceived expectation that they should remain emotionally composed during a time of extreme uncertainty. Several parents described how such expectations made it difficult to navigate contact with the service. Emotional reactions had to be controlled, not because the parents did not feel grief, anger, or despair, but because these reactions could be interpreted in ways that later worked against them. This contributed to a lasting caution in meetings and other interactions with the child welfare service.

This sense of distance was reinforced by experiences where parents felt their suggestions and input were ignored or left unacknowledged. The parents consistently described how their suggestions were often ignored or not taken into account:

I don't feel like there's any collaboration at all, and I don't know how one is supposed to deal with it [...] It's all just assumptions and opinions all the time. I find it very difficult [...] It's always based on what they want and how they assess things, what works best for them, not what might be best for the children and me, for example [...] when we ask for a professional explanation of how they make their decisions, they say: 'We've talked about this already, there's no need to go into it again. We understand your frustration.' [...] and when I asked again [at the last meeting], they just said: 'We haven't really looked into the case properly. [parent 7] I suggested a course at a meeting not long ago. They wrote it down and said it was interesting that I was willing to do it, but after that meeting, I haven't heard anything. [parent 4]

Beyond being ignored in meetings, several parents also described how their efforts to take initiative or show willingness to improve were met with little response. This added a layer of uncertainty to their everyday lives: it became unclear what, if anything, would count as meaningful engagement. Rather than being guided or supported, they were left guessing about what was expected and hesitant to push back, fearing that doing so might be used against them:

They say you're allowed to give input, and if you disagree, you have the right to complain and so on. But it doesn't help to complain, you just get it ten times worse [...] People are terrified of complaining! [Parent 6]

Several parents described how the formal right to complain felt like a false reassurance. Exercising this right could lead to tension or even be used against them, making it feel unsafe to speak up. What they often missed was genuine curiosity from child welfare services about why they felt dissatisfied, rather than their concerns being interpreted as personal attacks. This lack of mutual understanding was described by several as deepening a sense of insignificance and isolation, making it harder for parents to feel involved in or responsible for their child's life. Thus, participation appeared formally available, but fragile in practice. Parents could ask questions, suggest measures, or complain, yet these actions were described as carrying possible costs.

As the strain grew, some parents deliberately distanced themselves from the service, reducing contact to a minimum to avoid further disappointment or conflict. As one parent put it:

I don't trust them. But I'm very lucky to have a support network of friends and family around me [...] if I didn't, I probably wouldn't be here today. [parent 10]

For many, the erosion of trust influenced more than just their relationship with child welfare services. It affected how they navigated support systems, made everyday decisions, and maintained a sense of parental identity and responsibility in life after the removal. Rather than helping parents orient themselves after the care order, the follow-up relationship often became another source of uncertainty that they had to manage while trying to remain involved in their child's life.

3.2. Emotional distress and burdens in everyday life

This second theme explores how parents describe an everyday life marked by various forms of emotional distress and strain. A first dimension relates to parents' heightened sense of anxiety about how their actions might be interpreted and potentially used against them:

I don't dare do anything, because I'm afraid it will be used against me [...] I get kind of paranoid about it, really. I'm afraid. [parent 5]
They assume something is wrong ... with me [...] And of course, that makes you walk on eggshells, like ... is this good enough? [...] You start thinking about all these what-ifs that maybe didn't need to be there. [Parent 7]

These excerpts illustrate how parents describe living in a state of constant alertness and fear, where every action or statement might be misinterpreted. Parents described how this fear compromised their sense of control and their ability to gain an overview of their everyday situation, making daily life more challenging. For some, this fear translated into a persistent need to 'walk on eggshells' in their interactions with child welfare services. This was not described only as fear in formal meetings, but also as a form of everyday vigilance, in which ordinary actions, questions, and emotional reactions could be weighed against how the child welfare service might later interpret them.

A second dimension concerns how several parents described a shared experience of being excluded from their child's everyday life due to a lack of information about daily routines and important milestones. This absence of insight reinforced feelings of distance and powerlessness, both in relation to child welfare services and in their ability to maintain or re-establish a relationship with their child:

We barely know each other anymore. I don't know how to connect with my son [...] What does he do in his free time? How is school? I have nothing to go on. [Parent 9]
[...] I get no information between the visits about how he's doing and ... things like that. I know nothing when I show up for contact. [Parent 4]

These accounts reflect not only a desire for closer collaboration with child welfare services but also a deep sense of emotional loss. For many parents, the absence of basic information about their child's life intensified feelings of disconnection, helplessness, and grief, making it harder to sustain their parental identity and role. What was missing was not only formal information about the placement, but ordinary knowledge of the child's routines, interests, school life, and recent experiences. Without such knowledge, parents described contact as more difficult to prepare for and harder to enter as recognisable parents. They expressed a clear need for more reciprocal information-sharing about the child's daily life, something that could have given them 'a bit more to go on' in their efforts to sustain and rebuild the parent-child relationship.

Another aspect of emotional distress related to parents' descriptions of being excluded from important milestones in their child's life, such as birthdays, school events, or religious ceremonies:

He was confirmed this autumn. I didn't get an invitation, didn't know anything about it. I haven't even received any photos from the confirmation. [Parent 1]

Several parents described a similar sense of being cut off from what they saw as meaningful milestones. The absence of such recognition, both from the child's life and from the system, contributed to a weakening of their parental identity and a growing sense of not belonging.

These were not only exceptional events, but also moments through which parents could otherwise follow the child's development, be present in the child's life, and maintain continuity in the parental relationship. The emotional burden was particularly evident when parents learned of serious events, such as illness or hospitalisation, long after they had occurred:

[...] I was told about [a hospitalisation] a year after it happened. I was furious! That's just not okay. [Parent 3]

Several parents described a daily life shaped by a chronic sense of emotional unease. The late or absent information was not just experienced as a momentary injustice. It gave rise to lingering anxiety, a constant worry about what might have happened without their knowledge, and what else they still might not know. This kind of uncertainty became a recurring undercurrent in everyday life, making it difficult to feel grounded, involved, or emotionally safe. In this way, exclusion from information about the child's everyday life also became an exclusion from the practical and emotional work of remaining a parent at a distance.

A further source of emotional strain stemmed from parents' concerns about how their child had come to understand the reasons for being placed in public care. For many, this worry stemmed from not being allowed to speak with their child about the circumstances of the removal. Some parents had been informed that child welfare services had provided explanations to the child, but they felt these messages were vague or misleading, leaving the child confused or uncertain:

Mum can't take care of you." It's those words that really stick [...] The kids get confused. Moreover, they get ... well, what can I say? Unsure, maybe, about me as a parent. [Parent 10]

In addition, several parents expressed concern that foster carers might have accepted these official explanations without context, contributing to a sense of being misrepresented. Not being allowed to clarify or nuance these portrayals, to either the child or the foster parents, added a further layer of emotional insecurity. Some described feeling judged or avoided during visits, only later understanding that this might be linked to how the placement had been justified in the case documents. These experiences reinforced feelings of exclusion and emotional strain in encounters that were already deeply vulnerable. For parents, the concern was not only how the decision had been explained, but how such explanations could shape the child's understanding of them and the relational conditions for future contact.

A final aspect of emotional burden concerned how some parents internalised the child welfare service's descriptions of neglect and its consequences for the child. These narratives became deeply personal, shaping how parents viewed themselves and their own worth. Several described a profound sense of self-blame and the feeling of having caused harm to their child. For some, this emotional weight became so overwhelming that it affected their mental health and capacity to remain present in their child's life:

I feel like I've ruined another life [...] my son is emotionally harmed by contact. So I had a year where I was so mentally broken, I didn't see him. I couldn't let him see me like that [cries]. I had to protect him [...] He's better off without me in his life [...] I felt like some unfortunate object in the way of their [child welfare services'] job. Just something they had to run over and get out of the way so they could save that poor child. [parent 2]

I don't have contact ... I can't... I just can't have it in my life. The care order is the same as if your child died. Maybe even worse, because you have to fight the child welfare service all the time. [parent 1]

These accounts illustrate how the official framing of parental failure can trigger or intensify feelings of shame, guilt, and helplessness, contributing to depression and withdrawal. Some described a lasting sadness after the removal, while others said they had lost all strength to remain involved, believing their absence was better for the child.

Several parents used striking metaphors to describe their situation, including the sense that losing their child to the system was worse than death. For them, the pain was not only about separation, but about living with a version of themselves they no longer recognised, where 'the pain does not ease' and 'nothing seems to move forward'. These accounts show how the care order could affect parents' capacity to remain emotionally available to the child, not because the parental relationship had lost importance, but because shame, guilt, and fear of harming the child made continued involvement difficult to bear. Several parents also described how the emotional consequences of the care order continued to shape their everyday lives, long after the removal had taken place:

You become stigmatised in a completely different way ... something I had never experienced before [the care order]. [Parent 8]

I never thought I would find someone who wanted to be with me [...] It's not exactly easy to tell a new partner that I have children, but I don't have custody. [parent 2]

Even when parents tried to rebuild their lives, by moving, changing jobs, or forming new social networks, they described feeling compelled to live as if they were childless. For many, the care order became something they concealed in order to be socially accepted. Several parents spoke of a pervasive sense of shame that shaped how they understood themselves and how they presented their lives to others. This shame affected their social relationships and reinforced feelings of stigma and reduced self-worth. Everyday life was therefore also shaped by the work of managing what could be said, hidden, or explained in ordinary social encounters. Parenthood did not disappear, but became difficult to present in socially recognisable ways. For some parents, the emotional and social isolation following the care order was described as so profound that it affected their sense of meaning, belonging, and will to cope in everyday life:

[...] the importance of having someone who is there for you, who supports you and shows trust when everything becomes so difficult [...] I understand why people take their own lives. [Parent 6]

In this way, parents described a form of 'double loss', where the loss of the child was accompanied by the loss of a central part of their identity as a parent. The burden was therefore not confined to grief over separation, but extended into ordinary situations in which parents tried to maintain connection and present themselves to others. As such, the care order continued to shape how they saw themselves and how they related to others long after the removal, becoming an enduring presence in their everyday lives.

4. Discussion

This study has examined how parents experience their everyday lives after being involuntarily deprived of custody through a care order. While previous research has documented that child removal can trigger strong emotional reactions and long-term challenges for parents (e.g., Haight et al., 2017; Kenny & Barrington, 2018; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025; Olkowska & Aamodt, 2022; Syrstad & Ness, 2021), this study offers new insights into how such experiences unfold over time, and how they become embedded in parents' sense of self, agency, and belonging. Because the participating parents were interviewed at different points after removal, with placements ranging from twelve months to thirteen years, the findings illuminate how involuntary child removal may shape parents' everyday lives across different phases of the placement trajectory. The findings confirm earlier observations of grief, shame, and social stigma (Janzen & Melrose, 2017; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025) and deepen our understanding of how these burdens manifest in everyday life as chronic emotional distress, mistrust, and a diminished sense of meaning. In particular, the study highlights how emotional strain is not limited to the moment of removal but persists as a complex and ongoing challenge, shaped both by parents' internal struggles and by how they are positioned and often excluded in their encounters with public

services. In light of the findings, three interrelated areas warrant further discussion to understand how involuntary child removal shapes parents' everyday lives: parents' reduced ability to orient themselves and cope in everyday life, their experience of being marginalised and mistrusted by child welfare services, and the broader social consequences of losing their parental role.

First, the findings can be understood as reflecting a weakened sense of coherence in parents' everyday lives following the care order. Drawing on Antonovsky's (2012) model, the parents' accounts illustrate diminished experiences of comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness. When parents describe a lack of information and experience child welfare practices as unpredictable or unclear, this undermines their ability to make sense of what is happening. As Moksnes (2021) and Lindström and Eriksson (2015) point out, comprehensibility is essential for creating a sense of stability and control in the face of life crises. Clear and consistent communication about decisions and processes may thus be critical for enabling parents to orient themselves and regain a sense of order. Manageability was also compromised when parents felt they lacked access to resources or support needed to handle their new situation. According to Antonovsky (2012) and Kristensen et al. (2021), insufficient support during periods of high stress may increase the risk of emotional strain and health deterioration. Recognising parents as potential resources in their children's lives, even after a care order, may be important for reinforcing a sense of manageability and sustaining motivation for change. Finally, the deep sense of meaninglessness that many parents described in the aftermath of losing custody can be seen as a loss of meaningfulness. As Antonovsky (2012) argued, the loss of meaning reduces motivation to cope with or engage with challenging life situations. Working with parents to define realistic and meaningful goals, such as maintaining connection, contributing to the child's well-being, or being acknowledged in their parental role, may help counteract this. As such, supporting parents' sense of coherence may not only reduce emotional distress but also promote more sustained and constructive engagement with both the child and the welfare system.

Second, the findings suggest that parents' experiences of marginalisation and mistrust following the care order reflect a breakdown in both legal and affective recognition. Many parents described a deep sense of distrust toward child welfare services, rooted in a perceived lack of transparency and a sense that their efforts and development were not acknowledged. This eroded their confidence and reinforced feelings of being sidelined, misjudged, and excluded from decisions concerning their child. These dynamics are well documented in earlier research, in which parents describe interactions with the child welfare system as marked by emotional strain, power asymmetries, and institutional distance (e.g., Gerds-Andresen & Eriksen, 2025; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025; Otterlei & Engebretsen, 2021). When parents are excluded from decision-making and their perspectives are routinely dismissed, they are denied not only rights-based participation but also disqualified as morally responsible and emotionally meaningful actors (Otterlei et al., 2021; Schofield et al., 2011). The absence of such recognition contributes to a diminished sense of worth, and in contexts already shaped by vulnerability, may lead to experiences of humiliation and social degradation (Honneth, 2008). Several parents described struggling to process the removal without any space for reflection, emotional validation, or relational repair. The lack of affective responsiveness in follow-up further reinforced shame, confusion, and social withdrawal, consistent with earlier findings (Eriksen, 2024; Olkowska & Aamodt, 2022; Aamodt & Olkowska, 2023). This form of embodied shame, as Farstad (2020) describes it, may limit parents' emotional availability and sense of agency. To counteract this, recognition must serve more than mere reassurance. It must re-establish the psychological ground for relational trust and self-respect (Vinje et al., 2017). Vinje et al. (2017) argue that recognition plays a central role in restoring dignity, self-understanding, and trust after a crisis. When this is missing, the very distance that supportive follow-up is meant to bridge may instead be

reproduced or deepened (Syrstad & Ness, 2021). In this light, relational trust and affective recognition emerge not merely as ethical aspirations but as preconditions for meaningful engagement, sustainable support, and the realisation of the shared right of children and parents to maintain family life. As stated by ECtHR (2025), the 'mutual enjoyment' of one another's company requires not only legal structures, but also relational conditions that enable such contact to be both possible and meaningful.

Third, the findings indicate that child removal not only disrupts parental identity within the system but also undermines the social conditions for coherence, trust, and recognition in everyday life. Without the relational confirmation that comes with being recognised as a caregiver (Honneth, 2008), many parents struggled to uphold a coherent self-understanding in social contexts. The lack of language, space, or roles to express their continued identity as parents left them navigating social life with caution or silence. Avoiding social contact to conceal their changed status can be understood as a relational coping strategy, but one that ultimately undermines the conditions for solidarity-based recognition. While such withdrawal may offer temporary protection from stigma, it also limits opportunities for affirmation, reciprocity, and social repair. Over time, the absence of these relational conditions contributes to a loss of social legitimacy and a sense of belonging (Antonovsky, 2012). As Honneth (2008) argues, recognition through solidarity, being valued by others as a contributor, underpins both social participation and self-respect. When this recognition is withheld, individuals may lose not only access to community but also the psychological ground needed to sustain relational engagement. Farstad's (2020) concept of toxic shame captures how such exclusion may be embodied over time, becoming a mode of self-relation rather than a temporary emotional state. These experiences also point to a weakened sense of coherence in parents' everyday lives. When roles, routines, and social responses become unpredictable or opaque, comprehensibility and manageability are diminished (Antonovsky, 2012). In this light, the consequences of child removal extend far beyond the legal domain. When recognition is lost and coherence is disrupted, parents are not only separated from their child but also pushed to the periphery of social life (Antonovsky, 2012; Honneth, 2008). For many, the challenge is not only to adjust to a new reality but also to reconstruct a sense of self and belonging in a world that no longer mirrors who they were or whom they hoped to become. This process cannot be expected to unfold in isolation. It requires sustained support, relational recognition, and environments that allow parents to re-engage with social life in ways that affirm their worth and foster renewed participation (Honneth, 2008; Vinje et al., 2017).

4.1. Limitations

The interpretation of the findings should take into account the composition of the sample and the retrospective interview design. Although retrospective accounts may be shaped by the time elapsed since the care order, the central patterns in this study were consistent across parents regardless of how long the child had been in public care.

5. Conclusion

The findings show that the consequences of involuntary child removal extend beyond the initial legal intervention, shaping how parents navigate everyday life, sustain relationships, and understand themselves as parents. Parents' accounts illustrate how weakened trust, limited access to information, emotional distress, and changes in parental identity become embedded in everyday life after removal. For child welfare practice, the findings underscore the importance of active, continuous follow-up that provides accessible information, emotional support, and clarification of parents' ongoing role in the child's life. Such follow-up should recognise parents as individuals in crisis and as actors navigating stigma, structural asymmetries, and shifting parental

roles. Further research is needed to explore how professional responses either reinforce or mitigate these dynamics over time, and how different forms of follow-up may support parents' continued involvement in their children's lives after care orders are issued.

6. Authorship statement

All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis, and manuscript writing. All have reviewed and approved the final version and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT; reference number 454360) and conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research in the social sciences and humanities (NESH). Participation was based on informed consent. Parents who have been subjected to involuntary care orders are considered a vulnerable group, both due to the intervention itself and to the potential emotional strain involved in revisiting their experiences (Dalen, 2011; Lalayants & Saitadze, 2025; Olkowska & Aamodt, 2022). The research process was therefore designed to prioritise participants' safety, autonomy, and emotional well-being. They were informed about the purpose of the study, data handling, and anonymisation, and reminded of their right to withdraw at any time. Available support services were mentioned at the beginning and end of each interview.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data supporting this study's findings are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. Anonymized data may be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to approval by the relevant ethics committee.

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