Strengths-Based Practice in Child Welfare: A Systematic Literature Review

Abstract

This paper examines the academic research discourse on strengths-based practice in child welfare. A gap in the literature exists concerning systematic research studies addressing strengths-based practices with families in the child welfare system. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine how a strengths-based approach facilitates working relationships between child welfare services and families. A systematic review was performed following the principles of the PRISMA statement and included 11 peer-reviewed articles, published in English, in academic journals from multiple scientific databases, reporting primary research. Strengths-based skills were found to be essential to fostering a stronger rapport with families and to building relationships with them. Furthermore, strengths-based approaches facilitate personal engagement, which can increase the sense of empowerment and encourage families to find solutions and to make decisions about their own lives. One of the study's findings suggests that in the process of empowering families, workers themselves learned to empower themselves. Workers shifting towards strengths-based thinking enhanced their sense of self-empowerment, which increased their knowledge and skills to help empower families. The findings of this review indicate that the strengths-based perspective reported from the studies facilitates positive interaction between workers and families, including collaboration and the building of relationships.

Keywords: strengths-based practice, child welfare, systematic review, family engagement, relationship building

Highlights

- The strengths-based approach fosters stronger relationships and enhances self-empowerment.

- Workers learned to help empower families by learning to empower themselves.

- A strengths-based perspective promotes the client-as-the-expert view.

Strengths-Based Practice in Child Welfare: A Systematic Literature Review

Introduction

"The strengths perspective challenges professional conventions, habits of the mind" (Blundo, 2001)

Strengths-based practice (SBP) is considered a cornerstone of social work practice (Douglas et al., 2014) and an approach to achieving best practices in child welfare (Mirick, 2013; Oliver, 2017). Based primarily on the work of Saleebey et al. (Healy, 2014), it was developed in the field of social work in the 1980s at the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, specifically in the mental health context (Oliver, 2017; Weick et al., 2012). Saleebey and colleagues started to challenge the key concepts in the biomedical and psychiatric discourses, particularly the emphasis on individual pathology (Healy, 2014, p. 165), which focuses on an individual's shortcomings or weaknesses (Weick et al., 1989). Rice and Girvin (2010) indicated that the paradigmatic shift from the deficit model to the strength-based approach signals the profession's return to its roots. Saleebey (2012a) used the term *lexicon of pathology*, indicating that diagnostic labels attached to each individual as opposed to their situation led to a view that was not only degrading, but also overly pessimistic concerning the potential for solving problems. On the one hand, focusing on deficits was found to be an ineffective problem-solving strategy for service users while, on the other, such approaches questioned the values of the social work profession as a humanistic profession.

Min (2011) explicitly claimed, "the strengths-based approach is a response to the demand for ending value-based conflict in social work practice, stemming from a deficit-focused paradigm" (p. 15). Saleebey (2012a) explained the strengths-based *perspective* as a standpoint, a framework for viewing and understanding the potential in every individual, family, and community by translating their strengths into resources for positive change. It is therefore imperative to understand SBP embedded in humanistic values and the goal of securing individual dignity and integrity (Franklin, 2015; Golightley & Holloway, 2019; Zimmermann Wilson, 2006; Weick et al., 1989). In practice, this implies that SBP views human behaviour from the position of personal capacities, resilience, talents and the potential for change (Chapin, 1995; Dunn, 2017; Graybeal & Konrad, 2008), with an emphasis on service users' self-determination and partnership (Mainstone, 2014; Oliver & Charles, 2015).

Drawing on humanistic values (Manthey et al., 2011), the strengths perspective moves to establish a non-hierarchical working relationship with families (Blundo, 2001). Thus, it is an approach that requires social workers to blend into their practice, and one that requires discretionary leeway to tailor practices to fit the respective clients. Bozic et al. (2018) emphasised Saleebey's view of identifying strengths as "a way of learning about clients' unique qualities and ways to most effectively collaborate with them" (p. 27). As Saleebey (2012b) argued in favour of encouraging clients to build on their strengths, the relationship between the worker and the service user becomes a crucial part of the social work practice. When the solutions to a client's problem are tailored to the needs articulated by that client, and thus in collaboration with them, clients are also more likely to implement solutions and become engines in their own change (Saleebey, 2012b). In child welfare, engaging the family is especially challenging; as Healy and Darlington (2009) noted, promoting the participation of parents and children in the child welfare system is one of the most complex and sensitive areas of social work practice.

At the core of SBP in child protection work is the relationship between the family and the child protective worker (Pinkney, 2018; Turnell, 2004). Through such a relationship, the clients develop personal competence and trust in the helping process (Oliver, 2017). It can be said that the strengths perspective promotes, in a procedural manner, a sense of self-efficacy, which enables families to become more effective partners in working towards a change and well-being they accept (van Hook, 2019). On a principal level SBP promotes well-being by identifying families' strengths and capacities (Owens et al., 2019). Promoting families' strengths through SBP aims to seek change within the family that improves children's well-being (Ayón et al., 2010).

Scholars focusing on SBP argue that the strengths perspective facilitates client-centred approaches to professional practice (Blundo, 2006; Moher, 2019; Rajeev & Jeena, 2020). Clients become the experts of their own lives and experiences (Drolet et al., 2007; Odell, 2008; Oliver & Charles, 2015), whereas the worker's role is to mobilise and build on strengths, resources and capacities to tailor a solution that empowers the client to move towards a positive change that helps dissolve problems (Saleebey, 2012a). Accordingly, the strengths perspective is considered a professional practice framework for collaboration (Blundo, 2001; Early & GlenMaye, 2000; Franklin, 2015; Guo & Tsui, 2010), and for building relationships between workers and clients (Brun & Rapp, 2001; Franklin, 2015). The focus is on performing decision-making that is tailored to the client and empowering the client through their capabilities and potential for change (Michalopoulos et al., 2012). Several scholars examining SBP argued that

engaging clients in the assistance process is a critical task for child welfare workers (Dawson & Berry, 2012; Taylor et al., 2008).

Toros (2014) found that a strengths-based approach which elicits greater collaboration with families, also resulted in child protection workers reporting trusting relationships with families and more positive outcomes. Healy et al. (2014) indicated that a focus on building trust with the family was central to collaborative engagement. Having the discretionary leeway to become engaged with families is crucial for the change process to begin and, thereafter, to facilitating change. The need for engagement, and the discretion to do so, become imperative in the professional conduct of social work (Gladstone et al., 2014; Song & Shih, 2010). Such engagement, in turn, requires the identification and promotion of clients' strengths as well as the tailoring of decisions to solve problems and secure the empowerment of clients heading into the future (Ayón et al., 2010). Lwin et al. (2014) also emphasised how SBP encourages a child-safe environment in the course of engaging families while simultaneously promoting sustainable outcomes for both families and workers. Nevertheless, several concerns are expressed with the strengths perspective. Kisthardt (2012) outlined the question of safety, which has caused uneasiness with SBP, specifically concerning risks and harms going unnoticed. Others have argued that SBP ignores the real problems being faced by clients (Saleebey, 2012c). MacFarlane (2006) discussed the disappointment expressed by practitioners in having unrealistic perceptions of clients and giving false hope "by allowing clients to believe that they can do anything, any minor failure can cause a tremendous setback" (p. 175).

Scholars argued that although promoting engagement between families and workers is an essential part of the change and helping process (Harris, 2012; Loman & Siegel, 2015), engaging with families has been difficult in the child welfare system (Fusco, 2015; Gladstone et al., 2012). Jarpe-Ratner and Smithgall (2017) stated that "strengths-based interventions show great promise for child welfare practice; however, widespread adoption of such practices remains limited" (p. 284). Although child protection workers have been using strengths-based approaches for decades (Oliver & Charles, 2015), a literature gap concerning systematic research studies that address the use of SBP with families in the child welfare system remains. Therefore, this paper contributes to filling this gap by providing a systematic review specifically focused on direct practice with families. The study reported in this paper examined how strengths-based approaches facilitate working relationships between child welfare services and families.

Method

Search Strategy

The study design was based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009). A literature search for eligible studies was conducted in June 2019 using the electronic databases of Cambridge Journals, Academic Search Complete (via EBSCOhost Web), Oxford Journals, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley Online Library. The following search terms were entered into search engines: "strengths-based" AND "child protection" AND "child welfare." Search parameters included articles published in English in peer-reviewed academic journals with full-text availability.

Screening

A total of 189 articles were identified through database searching by applying the following parameters: full-text available peer-reviewed articles in the English language with one or more search terms. After removing 27 duplicates, a total of 162 articles remained for further screening of eligibility (see Figure 1). Further screening led to the exclusion of 121 articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria for the study, which was the occurrence of the combination of search terms in the title, abstract or keywords of the article.

Figure 1 here

For the other remaining 41 articles, the full text was read to make the final eligibility assessment. The eligibility criterion for the selection in the final sample was related to the research presented in those articles: reporting primary research related to strengths-based child welfare practices. Screening identified 11 articles with the data that studied the strengths-based approach in combination with child protection and welfare or family. In this process, screening excluded 30 articles due to ineligibility. The main reasons for exclusion were: (a) the topics did not focus on child welfare practice, for example, early childhood education (Bone & Fenton, 2015), interdisciplinary

research on parenting among different professionals (Eve et al., 2014) and strengths-based supervision among

workers (Lietz & Rounds, 2009; Lietz, 2018); and (b) the articles did not report primary research (e.g., Mirick,

2013; Pack, 2013, Smith et al., 2014; Young et al., 2014). A total of 11 articles remained after the final eligibility

assessment for inclusion in the systematic review. Each article is summarised in Table 1 using the following

categories: author(s), year, country, sample, method, study domain, key findings relevant to the present study, and

the methodological quality of articles.

Table 1 here

Data Analysis

The first author conducted the thematic analysis of the main findings of the 11 articles on how strengths-based

approaches facilitate a working relationship between child welfare services and families using principles outlined by

Braun and Clarke (2006). Data analysis consisted of generating initial codes and searching for, reviewing, refining,

and naming themes. Analysis of the data began with multiple readings of the findings of these articles to gain an

overall understanding of the texts, followed by a discovery of the initial codes inductively from the data, which

indicated potential patterns. Subsequently, the process of pattern formation and identification led to searching and

then to constructing codes into potential themes and labels. Themes and labels were reviewed again, and the

specifics of each theme refined. For example, initially, four themes emerged but two themes collapsed into each

other (collaborating and engaging). Themes were further defined and the essence for each theme determined. For

example, the theme of building trusting relationships included the labels SBP enabling to foster rapport, having

hopes as bridge to moving further, positive worker-client relationship and supportive relations, as these best

characterised the nature of the questions/responses for this theme (see Table 2). One label, promoting trust, included

sub-codes (parents' willingness to engage in services and positive outcomes). Three main themes emerged from the

analysis, described in the following sections.

Table 2 here

Based on PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), the methodological quality of articles in the final sample was assessed. The Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), developed for systematic literature reviews (Pace et al., 2012). MMAT makes it possible to evaluate the methodological quality of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies by calculating scores, which include the following: (a) for qualitative studies: qualitative objective or question, appropriate qualitative approach or method, description of the (i) context, (ii) participants and sampling, (iii) data collection and analysis and discussion of researchers' reflexivity; (b) for quantitative studies (descriptive): appropriate sampling and sample, justification of measurement, acceptable response rate; and (c) for mixed methods: a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection-analysis techniques or procedures, justification of the mixed methods design, integration of qualitative and quantitative data or results. Quality assessment scores for the articles included in this review are shown in Table 1, with criteria not met according to MMAT.

Results

The articles included in this review reported studies from three countries – the United States, Canada, and Estonia – from the years 2004 to 2018. As shown in Table 1, qualitative studies ($n = 4$), quantitative studies ($n = 3$), and mixed methods ($n = 4$) were represented in the analysis. An assessment of methodological quality indicated it was very good, as the average was 89% (ranging from 83% to 100%), whereas four studies met all MMAT quality criteria. The most common quality criteria not met were related to the discussion of researchers' reflexivity (not met in four qualitative and two mixed methods studies) and questions of appropriate measures and data analysis (in three descriptive and mixed methods studies).

Data analysis revealed three main themes of approaches that facilitate relationships: collaboration, building a (trusting) relationship, and empowerment. Each of these themes is described in the following sections.

Collaboration

Studies referred to as strengths-based approaches, it is argued, facilitate collaboration between the worker and family (Lietz, 2011; Lwin et al., 2014; Oliver & Charles, 2015; Toros et al., 2015; Toros & LaSala, 2018). A

general view on collaboration involves both workers and families engaged to solve problems by initiating change. Findings from a study with child welfare investigative workers and supervisors indicated that SBP were thought to provide a new opportunity for engaging caregivers that enhanced service and collaboration concerning the current situation at hand, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the family's child welfare history (Lwin et al., 2014). Kemp et al. (2014) found empirical support for the link between parents' willingness to engage in services and the use of strengths-based interventions. Practitioners in Lwin et al.'s (2014) study spoke the importance of not "losing the sight of what is going on now" (p. 90) and of building on existing strengths, which was considered crucial in fostering collaboration and encouraging families to become involved in the process of child welfare investigations. Here, it is important to note that these practitioners were not only identifying strengths but, also balancing these strengths with risks. Child protection workers from Oliver and Charles's (2015) study described the meaning of balancing strengths with risks by "seeking the bigger picture with the goal being a broad, balanced, and fair understanding that attended to both risks and strengths" (p. 139). Therefore, they acknowledged the possibility of risks being present. An example from one of the parents demonstrates how crucial it is for the family that strengths be identified and elicited and how focusing on deficits disempowers them:

> They make decisions based on their other cases and that could be bad in a lot of situations. There's so much more to a family than what they're seeing from the outside or what they're reading on a paper. I don't think that's right at all … it's like that gets you down, that makes you feel like you're inadequate, you know. They will peck and peck at lots of mistakes, they have the power. (Lietz, 2011, p. 891)

Toros and LaSala (2018) found a strong correlation between the strengths of the client and the client-worker relationship, and that the strengths of the client correlate positively and significantly with skills and knowledge and assessment in child protection, suggesting that a strengths-based approach to clients promotes collaboration and positive interaction between the client and practitioner in the assessment process. Workers, who believed they were successful in collaborating with families, reported the embedding of SBP into their practice. Furthermore, child protection workers who were believed to have skills and knowledge of SBP placed greater emphasis on learning about families' resources and strengths in the assessment process, rather than on looking for deficits and faults. Looking for faults in this context refers to identifying those responsible for not supporting the well-being of the children. Identifying and building on families' strengths enhanced a form of collaboration that

would take parents' experiences as a point of departure (Lietz, 2011). Parents emphasised understanding and expressed their choices were being honoured by the child welfare workers, making them feel appreciated and leading to a willingness to collaborate with these service providers.

Furthermore, according to Oliver and Charles (2015), while using a strengths-based approach, there was never a time when meaningful collaboration between worker and client was not possible. Meaningful collaboration meant well-resourced clients who had been regularly engaged to participate in the child protection process. Oliver and Charles highlighted that workers adjusted their views of collaboration to align with clients' views. Toros et al. (2015) reported similar findings, where collaboration, considered a result of SBP, led to child protection workers identifying no cases in which families were not involved. In Toros et al.'s (2018) study, workers who believed they were successful in their efforts with families reported having adopted SBP. Oliver and Charles's (2015) research indicated that opportunities for success with clients based on SBP were rated at 85%; however, 40% reported SBP was not appropriate in every situation, and 43% reported SBP was not appropriate for all child protection clients.

Saint-Jacques et al. (2009) reported SBP "can be employed more easily in interventions with a voluntary framework, especially in regard to taking the clients' wishes into account when setting goals and applying the intervention plan" (p. 459). Nevertheless, Lwin et al. (2014) found that SBP is effective with families who have typically declined involvement with an agency in the past. This was linked to the workers' approach towards families in building a trusting relationship. Parents' reflections from Lietz's (2011) study were indicative of the workers' approach as well, particularly in their belief in the parents'/families' capacity for growth, which was found to be essential for engaging in a collaborative relationship with the worker.

Building (Trusting) Relationships

As referred to at the end of the last theme, a trusting relationship was the basic aim of family-worker collaborations. Several studies referred to SBP in relation to building a (trusting) relationship. For example, Gibson et al. (2018) and Lwin et al. (2014) found that strengths-based skills are essential to fostering a stronger rapport with families and building relationships with them. In Gibson et al.'s (2018) study, one social worker compared the emphasis on building positive client relationships of SBP to the approach of the deficit model, referring to the latter as a compliance-oriented practice similar to *policing*; while SBP considers families' needs and capacities (before intervening), the deficit model represents "an authoritarian invasion by telling parents" (p. 47), creating tension and

leading to the alienation of families. Lwin et al. (2014) outlined the importance of workers' trust and transparency in promoting rapport with families, particularly regarding to workers' roles and concerns about their clients. Other studies reported honesty and transparency in the same context as facilitating positive relationships (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Oliver & Charles, 2015; Saint-Jaques et al., 2009; Toros et al., 2015). Oliver and Charles (2015) identified transparency as central to developing trust, given that sharing information and following agreements cultivate a client's trust. As explained by Saint-Jaques et al. (2009), trust can grow when the worker is respectful towards the client, seeking to co-construct goals with the family. Toros et al. (2015) reported child protection workers experiencing trusting relationships with families leading to more positive outcomes, which led to improvements in parents' abilities to provide safe, stable environments for their children. In sum, a trusting relationship was found to be fundamental to successfully engaging the family (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Oliver & Charles, 2015).

Arbeiter and Toros (2017) similarly determined that a strengths-based approach is an important part of the assessment process in building a trusting relationship. Some child protection workers used the term *having hopes* regarding SBP, a viewpoint that was seen as a possibility to start building a trusting relationship with the client. They acknowledged the usefulness of having hopes for the clients to develop motivation and work towards these goals. A realistic depiction of working towards goals is to characterise and pursue it as a hope; this is a central concept of the strengths-based approach, defined as the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals (Snyder, 2002).

Some studies related the building of relationships to securing supportive relationships. Concerning the notion of support, parents in Lietz's (2011) study stressed the importance of a non-judgemental attitude to their being engaged. Similarly, in Oliver and Charles' (2015) study, workers emphasised how critical it was to support their clients to be as self-determining as possible in keeping their children safe. In Arbeiter and Toros' (2017) study, workers believed that SBP facilitates the support and encouragement of families. Additionally, Palmer-House (2008) suggested that SBP gave workers the skills required to assist in terms of empowering families to help themselves.

Empowerment

A central theme emerging from the data analysis was the concept of empowerment. Toros and LaSala (2018) found that, according to child protection workers, SBP empowers clients to elicit changes. Identifying and talking about families' strengths may promote feelings of self-efficacy and an increased ability to parent effectively (Lwin et al., 2014). Arbeiter and Toros (2017) reported that, based on child protection workers' experience, a strengths-based approach – identifying resources within and outside the family and the potential to promote the well-being of the child – can facilitate engagement, which can increase the sense of empowerment and encourage families to find solutions and make decisions about their own lives. Acknowledging strengths was also found to facilitate parents becoming resilient and experiencing increased motivation (Oliver & Charles, 2015). Green et al. (2004) suggested that services delivered according to a strengths-based approach would lead to increased empowerment. They found that families who perceived workers to be providing services in ways that empower them to develop their strengths and competencies tended to be more involved in programme services. Oliver and Charles (2015) noted that acknowledging strengths helped to open families to new perspectives, including an ability to recognise concerns about child safety. Further, employing a strengths-based approach can support workers to consider families' wishes when defining objectives and applying the intervention plan (Saint-Jacques et al., 2009).

Lietz (2011) concluded that empowerment includes soliciting and honouring family choice, and therefore is critical to a family-centred approach to child welfare. Lietz also argued that SBP affects the way a worker approaches each case with a belief and hope in the capacity and potential for growth and solutions. Palmer-House (2008) discussed an interesting finding that suggested, in the process of empowering families, workers learned to empower themselves. A shifting paradigm to strengths-based thinking enhanced their own sense of self-empowerment, which in return increased their knowledge and skills to help to empower families.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

In the following, we discuss some of the main findings and elaborate on these findings based on perspectives from other scholars. The core of social work is based on interaction and relationships. As Parton and O'Byrne (2000) noted, social workers' expertise traditionally has been built on the ability to know how to establish relationships. Murphy et al. (2012) used the term *relationship-based practice* in social work in this context. The manner in which families are approached is crucial (Forrester et al., 2019), as it determines the ability to build

positive relationships and is the key to meaningful engagement (Gibson et al., 2018). Although effective

engagement is an essential component of working with families (Loman & Siegel, 2015; Underwood & Killoran

2012), it remains challenging for practitioners to achieve (Khan et al., 2018; Muench et al., 2017). Therefore, a

better understanding of collaborative approaches to child welfare to enhance working relationships between child

welfare workers and families is needed. As highlighted by one of the authors included in the literature review, there

is little question that the strengths perspective has influenced the way social workers think about practice (Lietz,

2011); however, it is unclear whether SBP has changed or impacted this practice. Barnes-Lee (2020), almost a

decade later, similarly agreed that evidence of the empirical and practical advantages of a strengths perspective is

limited.

According to Galloway et al. (2020) and Fusco (2019), the literature on SBP could establish a roadmap

towards securing the well-being of families at risk. However, no empirical studies have expressed sound criticism of

the shortcomings of SBP or of the failure to reach such an end. As indicated in the introduction, SBP is considered

both an effective and ethically sound practice framework embedded in the humanistic values of social work

(Douglas et al., 2014). By working towards creating a collaborative practice that empowers the client, "how social

workers encounter their fellow human beings is critical; furthermore, they must engage individuals as equals"

(Saleebey, 1996, p. 303). This small-scale literature review indicates that SBP facilitates collaboration with clients

and that it helps in building trusting and empowering relationships with them. In this manner, SBP becomes an

engaging practice that enhances positive interaction and leaves the child welfare worker with a lot of leeway to tailor

decision-making for each particular client. For the child welfare worker, SBP fosters opportunities to engage in

processes that explore wishes and needs, allow the co-construction of goals, and give the family a voice; this, in

turn, requires the child welfare worker who employs SBP to decide what is best for the client. However, one of the

more complicated responsibilities of child welfare in making decisions regarding families is to avoid interventions

that are coercive (Benbenishty et al., 2015). Because the casework is embedded in legal protections and a system of

rights for all of their clients, child welfare workers participate in a system that is heavily regulated and difficult to

navigate (Duncan, 2019; Hultman et al., 2018). Although this makes the participation of families even more

important from a social work perspective, policy and legal restrictions are often in abundance, which is an

impediment to SBP and the need for ongoing tailoring and autonomous decision-making specific to the client.

Engaging with families through SBP means that workers value the contributions from parents and children in

securing the children's well-being. Although SBP views the client as an active participant and maintains a belief in individual growth and change (Drolet et al., 2007; Odell, 2008; Weick et al., 1989), legal frameworks and rights set parameters for decision-making that restrict the discretionary leeway of child welfare workers.

Khan et al. (2018) viewed engagement in collaboration as a two-way road, emphasising the quality of professional practice in terms of the client's sense of trust in the system itself and their motivation to collaborate and receive and follow up on services. Taylor et al. (2008) agreed, stating that effective engagement is central to finding an appropriate intervention and assessing children's welfare adequately. Munro (2011) argued that the quality of the relationship between the family and professionals directly impacts the efficacy of assistance. Collaborative relationships are based on trust, transparency, and mutual respect and are reflected in multiple articles where these qualities were attached to SBP. Moher (2019) outlined that building rapport and relationships based on trust is predominantly carried out in child welfare to learn about families' situations and needs and in the hope of reaching support for positive outcomes.

Empowerment was one of the main keywords throughout articles related to the outcome of SBP, which is typically grounded in humanistic values of social work (e.g., self-determination, dignity), underpinning the view of people as active participants in service delivery that affects their lives (Noble et al., 2000). Keys (2009) believed that enabling parents to feel empowered is key to protecting children. Empowerment reduces vulnerability and increases the power or capabilities to make choices and changes (Albuquerque et al., 2017). McCormick et al. (2018) elaborated the importance of consciously drawing on strengths in solving families' problems. Findings similarly suggested SBP as a means to develop competencies, increase self-efficacy, and encourage families to contribute to finding solutions through a collaborative, trusting relationship. In this way, parents are motivated to participate to reach the desired outcome. One crucial finding from the review can be drawn from Palmer-House's (2008) study, suggesting that strengths-based thinking not only enhances empowerment and relationships between the worker and family but also enhances self-empowerment. Such an outcome is crucial in child welfare work because of the challenges that potentially lie ahead. Correspondingly, Sabalauskas et al. (2014) believed that strength-based interventions have demonstrated the ability of both client and worker to build a roadmap to follow. This can be elaborated with the idea from Dunn (2017) that "strengths-based approaches create a powerful way to harness the full complexity of a person" (p. 395), which not only relates to families as clients but also to the ones who

implement SBP. Such a perspective makes sense, especially when a positive change in families' lives, one that can be a persuasive and motivating factor to practice more SBP, is seen. It can be argued that it sounds rather logical to say that being a part of positive change is empowering, especially in the field of child welfare within the context of child neglect and abuse.

To conclude, SBP is not a miracle cure in child welfare, nevertheless, it is one approach or good practice to facilitate collaboration and working relationship between child welfare services and families. Studies included in the review indicated no evidence for the possible negative outcomes associated with SBP. This strengthens the value of SBP to be acknowledged and practised with families in child welfare settings. As Blundo (2006) wrote 15 years ago, "the strengths perspective offers the profession an opportunity to change frames and learn to empower families through developing a respectful, unbiased and supportive relationship" (p. 395) and it is essential to remember in working with families today.

Limitations

Several limitations apply to this study. First, the number of articles included in the analysis is small ($N =$ 11), raising questions about the transferability of the findings. In this regard, a greater amount of research from different countries on SBP in child welfare would allow more definite conclusions to be made. Second, limitations exist in comparing the findings due to the wide scope of the studies, as indicated in Table 1; more specifically, there were differences among child welfare settings and in the methods used (e.g., service delivery, family or parental engagement, child welfare investigations, families in difficulty). Nevertheless, all three themes were presented in most of the studies: collaboration in nine studies, building a (trusting) relationship in eight studies, and empowerment in eight studies. Third, only peer-reviewed journals were included in the study. The use of an alternative search strategy could have provided additional studies and grey literature. Fourth, the focus on studies written in English limited the search from identifying articles in other languages. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study shed light on the benefits of SBP as reported in the literature: facilitating collaboration, building trusting relationships, empowering clients, and enhancing their willingness to engage in services.

Implications for Research and Practice

It is beneficial to further explore various strengths-based approaches adapted to the statutory child protection settings and how SBP, which grants broad discretionary leeway for each child welfare worker, can become embedded in practice in harmony with legislative restrictions and policy goals. Two of the studies, both in Canada, referred to the Sign of Safety model (SOS): the mapping conference intervention in Lwin et al.'s (2014) study was based on the SOS model, and Oliver and Charles (2015) discussed SOS as a strengths-based model adapted for the statutory child protection setting. SOS was developed by Turnell and Edwards with social workers in Australia in the 1990s (Keddell, 2014), and it is embedded in a belief in collaboration, SBP and the safety of the child. Moreover, the SOS model is a practical method that draws on a solution-focused brief therapy to foster a cooperative relationship between workers and families, eliciting the family's perspective on competencies, existing safety and goals (Turnell & Edwards, 1997). Nelson-Dusek et al. (2017) indicates SOS is a safety-organised practice, using families' strengths as qualities to increase the safety of children. Turnell (2004) emphasised that "sensitivity to strengths does not itself solve problems, but information about both problems and strengths are best interpreted and make the most sense when considered in the light of a participatory exploration of solutions and safety" (p. 20). Oliver and Charles (2015) explained SOS as a practice to evaluate risks without discarding the principles of SBP. All of these scholars referred to in this section consider SOS an approach to engaging with families and to developing effective worker-client relationships in child protection. Discussions and more studies are needed on how practitioners succeed in applying strengths-based approaches (SOS and others) in their work. Also, it is useful to examine the effectiveness of such strengths-based models from the service user perspective.

Although the use of strengths-based approaches has become more widespread since its adoption not only in social work but also in education (Akiva et al., 2017; Galloway et al., 2020), nursing (Gottlieb & Gottlieb, 2017; Svavarsdottir & Gisladottir, 2019), and even in quantitative data analysis (Thurber et al., 2020), studies in child welfare indicate a focus on deficit-based practices (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Harris, 2012; Lauri et al., 2020). Similarly, Kemp et al. (2014, p. 27) discussed that "child welfare policy and practice increasingly emphasises the use of strength-based practice with efforts to reduce identified risks to child safety." However, compared with strategies for assessing risk, strength-based child welfare interventions currently lack a robust empirical foundation. One of the important findings in this study's screening phase was the small number of articles that met the eligibility criteria for the final sample – 11 out of 189 articles. The screening process indicated that SBP is a commonly used keyword tag in academic journals; nevertheless, a gap in empirical studies in the field of child welfare practice

remains. Further scholarly research that embraces data from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives is required to understand and learn about SBP in child welfare, specifically to contribute to the understanding of the effectiveness of strengths-based interventions for families at risk. As the child welfare system builds practice models, additional empirical research is necessary to test their efficacy for and impact on children (Ahn et al., 2016).

More research is needed to examine the individual and environmental factors involved in implementing SBP with families, including those that are supportive and limiting. Furthermore, additional research is required to investigate how practitioners use strengths-based models and how these models are useful in developing relationships and engaging with families and to determine the challenges in implementing strengths-based models. As Lwin et al. (2014) stated, "the desire to develop collaboration and engagement between child welfare workers and families involved with the system requires an understanding of the factors involved in facilitating these positive relationships" (p. 84).

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Table 1

Overview of Articles Included in the Analysis

| Study	Country	Participants	Method	Study domain	Key findings relevant to the present study	Quality assessment*	
						MMAT score	Criteria not met
Arbeiter & Toros, 2017	Estonia	Child protection workers (11), parents (11), children (11)	Semi-structured interviews	Family engagement in child protection assessment	Strengths-oriented approaches facilitate support and encouragement for the families; empowerment and partnership were related to more effective engagement.	83%	Researchers' reflexivity
Gibson et al., 2018	USA	Child welfare professionals (28)	In-depth interviews	Social work in child welfare	Strengths-based assessment is essential to building relationships.	83%	Researchers' reflexivity
Green et al., 2004	USA	Parents (68): study 2	Survey	Service delivery in family support programs	Strengths-based practices promote respect and feeling of being valued for the families, including increased empowerment.	100%	
Kemp et al., 2014	USA	Primary caregivers (679), child welfare	Survey	Strength-based practice and parental engagement in	Strengths-based approach indicates challenging parents positively.	100%	

		caseworkers (327)		child welfare			
Lietz, 2011	USA	Parents (44)	In-depth interviews	Family-centred practice	Strengths-based approach was experienced as supportive and non-judgmental; furthermore, parents felt a belief in their capacity for change and growth.	83%	Researchers' reflexivity
Lwin et al., 2014	Canada	Child welfare investigative workers (146), child welfare investigative workers (13), child welfare investigative supervisors (13),	Mixed method: case data and focus group interviews	Child welfare investigations	Strengths-based practice enables to engage caregivers for enhancing service and collaboration; identifying strengths promotes self-efficacy.	83%	Researchers' reflexivity, unclear measurements in mapping process
Oliver & Charles, 2015	Canada	Statutory child protection workers (225), statutory child	Mixed method: survey and semi-structured interviews	Child protection work	Acknowledging strengths facilitates clients to see new perspectives, increasing motivation; furthermore, it supports the development of a positive worker-client relationship.	83%	Researchers' reflexivity, unclear measurements

		protection workers (24)					in survey design
Palmer-House, 2008	USA	Family workers (15), family members (25)	In-depth semi-structured interviews, brief semi-structured interviews	Strengths-based family support	Strengths-based approach helps workers to empower families; furthermore, workers learned to help empower families by learning to empower themselves.	100%	
Saint-Jacques et al., 2009	Canada	Practitioners working with families (77), practitioners working with families (30)	Mixed methods: survey, based on users' records and semi-structured interviews	Families in difficulty	Employing strengths-based approach supported workers to consider families' wishes.	83%	Unclear description of data analysis, researchers' reflexivity
Toros & LaSala, 2018	Estonia	Child protection workers (101)	Survey	Family assessment in child protection	Strengths-based assessment promotes trust, collaboration, and positive interaction between the client and the practitioner.	100%	
Toros et al., 2015	Estonia	Child protection workers (20)	Semi-structured interviews	Assessment of children in need	Strengths-based approach facilitates collaboration, trusting relations between worker and families.	83%	Researchers' reflexivity

Note. MMAT assessment criteria based on Pace et al. (2012, p. 51-52) was used to evaluate the quality of the articles included in the analysis.

Table 2

Strengths-based Practice in Child Welfare: Main Themes and Labels

Collaboration
SBP providing an opportunity for collaboration; enhancing positive interaction; meaningful collaboration; focus on client's wishes; co-constructing goals
Building trusting relationships
SBP enabling to foster rapport; having hopes as bridge to moving further; promoting trust: parents' willingness to engage in services, positive outcomes; positive worker-client relationship; supportive relations
Empowerment
SBP empowering to elicit changes; self-efficacy: ability to parent more effectively; facilitating engagement between the worker and family: sense of empowerment; building innate resilience, motivation; seeing new perspectives for child safety (family); family-centred; increase in workers' own sense of self-empowerment
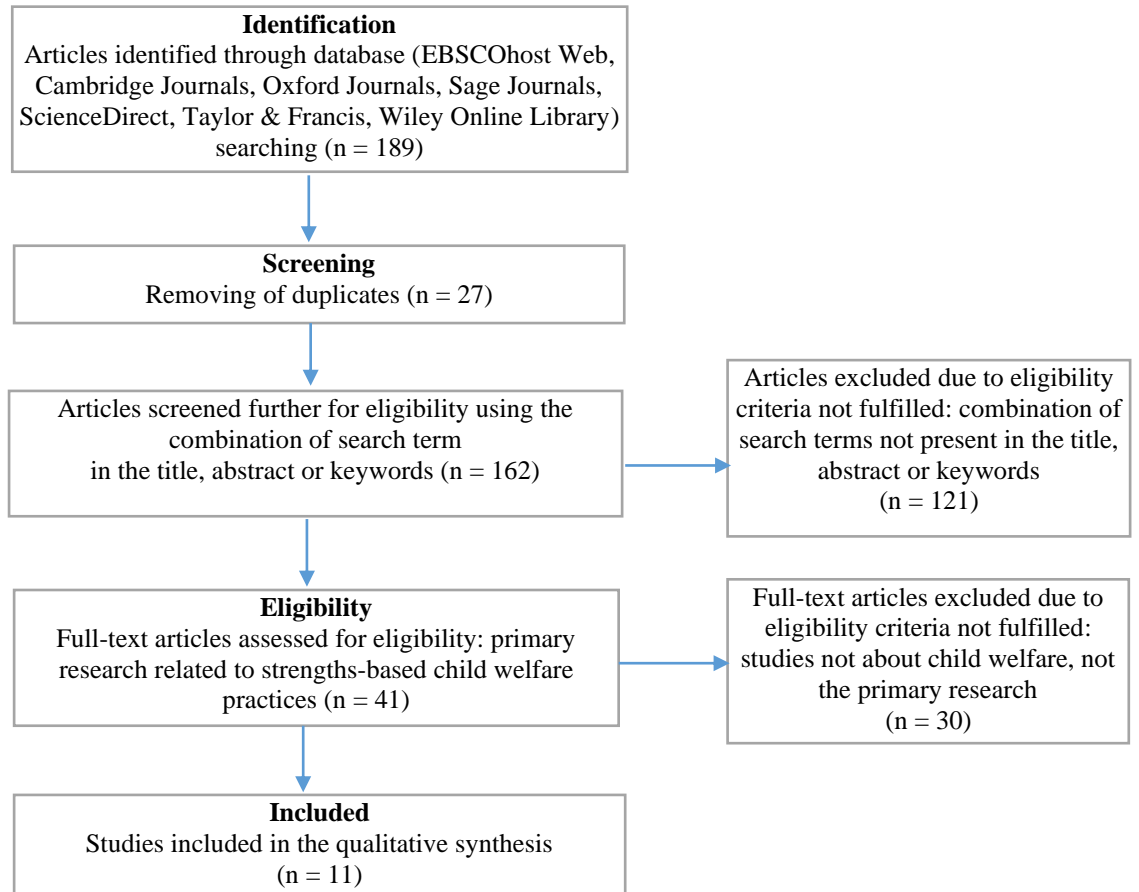
Figure 1

PRISMA Flow Diagram: Identification, Screening, Eligibility Assessment and Inclusion of the Articles