

Osajulkaisu II

Vainikka, P. (2025). Finnish social work professionals' interpretations of children's sorrow in client encounters. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2025.2577327>



CC BY-NC-ND Nimeä–Ei-muutoksia–Ei-kaupallinen

Artikkeli julkaistaan uudestaan väitöskirjan osana artikkelin alkuperäisten tekijän oikeuksien haltijan ystävällisellä luvalla.



Finnish social work professionals' interpretations of children's sorrow in client encounters

Paula Vainikka

To cite this article: Paula Vainikka (30 Oct 2025): Finnish social work professionals' interpretations of children's sorrow in client encounters, Nordic Social Work Research, DOI: [10.1080/2156857X.2025.2577327](https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2025.2577327)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2025.2577327>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 30 Oct 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 170



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Finnish social work professionals' interpretations of children's sorrow in client encounters

Paula Vainikka 

Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work, University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland

ABSTRACT

This article examines professionals' interpretations of children's sorrow faced in social work. The research question is, *How do professionals interpret children's sorrow in social work?* It focuses on understanding the types of sorrow that children manifest in encounters with social workers and how the different types are perceived. The study is based on data from five group interviews conducted between January and June 2022 with 17 social workers in Finland. The qualitative content analysis of the study reveals that children's sorrow is often perceived as hidden and unrecognized in the context of social work. This invisibility is partly due to the difficulties faced by social workers in identifying sorrow. Also, the Finnish sorrow tradition, where manifestations of sorrow are often restrained or subtle, is linked to children's sorrow. These factors make it challenging to acknowledge children's sorrow. The study highlights the need for greater awareness and specialized training to help social workers identify and respond to the nuanced ways in which children manifest sorrow. By recognizing the hidden nature of children's sorrow, the research calls for improved practices to ensure that children's emotional and psychological needs are better understood and supported within social work frameworks.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 24 April 2024

Accepted 13 October 2025

KEYWORDS

Children's sorrow;
manifestations of sorrow;
social work practice; social
work with children

Introduction

This article examines social workers' interpretations of children's sorrow faced in social work. The research question is, *How do professionals interpret children's sorrow in social work?* It focuses on understanding the types of sorrow that children manifest in encounters with social workers and how the different types are perceived. In exploring the issue, this article looks at sorrow as both a social and a psychological phenomenon to provide a more comprehensive basis for understanding sorrow in the context of social work. From a sociological perspective, sorrow is an interpersonal emotion that emerges within relationships (Jakoby 2012, 680), and its manifestation is shaped by social and cultural factors (Pulkkinen 2016). Psychologically, sorrow often triggers reactions such as fear, anger and shock, illustrating its complex emotional impact (De Stefano et al. 2021). Beyond these perspectives, sorrow can also be conceptualized as a multidimensional experience encompassing emotional, relational, and existential dimensions (Rando 1993). Recent research describe it as a recurring, enduring emotional state linked to ongoing experiences of loss and change (Olwit et al. 2018). Such perspectives highlight that sorrow is also deeply tied to one's sense of meaning, identity, and continuity of life. The use of the concept of sorrow in this research enables a more

CONTACT Paula Vainikka  paula.vainikka@ulapland.fi

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

nuanced exploration of children's lived experiences in social work, acknowledging both emotional responses and broader social contexts that shape them.

The causes of sorrow in children are diverse, ranging from the death (Bugge et al. 2014) or illness of a loved one (Birenbaum et al. 1990; Pabon and Basile 2022) to personal illness (Laing and Moules 2015), parental divorce (Marcussen et al. 2019), or even the end of a friendship (Protivnak et al. 2020). How children manifest sorrow is influenced by various contextual factors (Jakoby 2012). While death is an extreme form of loss often studied in relation to grief, social workers encounter subtler forms of sorrow that arise from everyday challenges (Goldsworthy 2005, 167–168). Identifying and addressing these forms of sorrow is essential in social work, as it can provide more effective help for clients (Penzo and Harvey 2008, 323). In this study, sorrow is used to denote this broader emotional experience that can be linked to a wide range of life events apart from bereavement, which Shear (2012, 461) links to grief.

Social workers play a crucial role in supporting grieving children by providing comprehensive, trauma-informed care that addresses the unique emotional and psychological needs of these young individuals. Their expertise includes creating safe spaces for children to express their grief, offering age-appropriate counselling, and facilitating support groups that promote healing through shared experiences (Griese et al. 2017). Social workers also collaborate with families, schools, and community resources to ensure a holistic approach to care, recognizing that a child's grief impacts their broader environment (Quinn-Lee 2014). Research highlights the importance of a strengths-based, approach that not only addresses immediate grief reactions but also fosters long-term resilience and adaptive coping strategies. However, previous research on grief and sorrow in social work has predominantly conducted in the context of foster care (Look 2018; Mitchell 2017). For example, Mitchell (2017) discusses 'ambiguous loss', based on Pauline Boss's (1999) concept, where a loved one is psychologically present but physically absent – a situation commonly encountered in foster care. Such loss often causes sorrow in children. In foster care, children's perceptions of family can be complex and sometimes confusing (Samuels 2009, 1229), and taking children into custody may lead to a range of emotions, including grief and sorrow (Fineran 2012, 370). Previous research on working with grieving children has therefore been rather limited or focused on only one aspect of it, and there has been little research on how social workers recognize grief and sorrow in their work – even though they often encounter children's grief as a general, multifaceted phenomenon embedded in a wide range of human life situations.

In Finland, social work with children includes more than child protection, as the Finnish system emphasizes preventive support for children and families over emergency placements and foster care (Lamponen 2022, 25). The cultural (Fineran 2012) and experiential (Thompson et al. 2016) dimensions of sorrow are also crucial, as the ways grief and sorrow are experienced and manifested are influenced by social structures and cultural norms (Thompson et al. 2016). Limiting sorrow to a single perspective leaves our understanding of it incomplete. Therefore, more research is needed, especially from cultural and social scientific viewpoints, to better grasp the full scope of sorrow in children (Kofod and Køster 2022, 3). In Finnish social work, sorrow is linked not only to loss but also to a broader spectrum of life events.

Cultural norms in Finland have traditionally construed sorrow as private and hidden, leading to the suppression of the associated emotions. In Finnish grief tradition, grief is often characterized by its hidden nature, where emotions surrounding loss may not always be openly expressed. Instead, there is a cultural tendency to internalize feelings, leading to a nuanced grieving process. Consequently, as children observe adults managing their emotions quietly, it may affect children's understanding of loss and influence the way they perceive and express their own grief. As a result, children might struggle to articulate their feelings, leading to a more solitary experience, unless encouraged by supportive community practices that help draw out these hidden emotions

(Pulkkinen 2016). This norm environment highlights the need to create spaces for children to express their sorrow openly.

Children's sorrow in social work

Working with experiencing grief and sorrow, especially in child protection involves navigating emotionally demanding practices for both practitioners and clients. This study frames these challenges through Hochschild's (1979) notion of *emotion work* and later concepts of *emotion management* and *emotional labour* (Hochschild 1983), emphasizing how social workers interpret, regulate, and balance emotions within professional and organizational expectations. Research highlights the value of resilience strategies and supportive organizational environments in mitigating these pressures (McFadden, Campbell, and Taylor 2015; Parton 2014), while the emotional politics of social work underscore the need for solidaristic, institutional support for practitioners. Yet empirical research on how social workers understand and engage with clients' emotions remains scarce (O'Connor 2019), and children's grief is still under-explored (Brinkmann 2019a; Quiñones et al. 2021). This study seeks to bridge these gaps by offering new insights into the multidimensional nature of children's sorrow and its implications for social work practice.

Children as well as adults experience sorrow. However, a key difference is that children are heavily dependent on adults for support, which can complicate their ability to process and cope with loss. Children's means of seeking help are often limited, and they may lack verbal skills to manifest their grief effectively (see Kübler-Ross and Kessler 2005, 189). Young children in particular live in the moment and may struggle to grasp the permanence of events like death (Cohen and Mannarino 2011, 118), making it even harder for them to process their emotions. Thus, children may find it next to impossible to navigate sorrow, as even experienced professionals sometimes find the emotion challenging to address (Riely 2003, 212).

While loss caused by death is a significant source of grief, children's sorrow extends beyond this and includes a wide array of life challenges. Everyday experiences such as loneliness, the lack of friendships, illnesses, being separated from parents and various transitions during childhood can all cause distress and sadness (Quiñones et al. 2022, 3–4). These experiences highlight the need to view children's sorrow in a broader context, encompassing both social and experimental dimensions. Social relationships play a central role in children's daily lives and their dynamics can significantly impact on the way children process sorrow (Pirskanen 2023). If social environments discourage the expression of emotions, children may suppress their grief and sorrow or manifest them through negative behaviours (Fineran 2012, 372).

Losing a parent through death, custody arrangements or other severe circumstances is regarded as one of the most traumatic experiences a child can face. Such loss can occur at any age, but it is often particularly devastating for children (Bugge et al. 2014, 36). Recognizing the grief of children in foster care is critical, as this group often faces unique challenges in processing their emotions. Providing a safe environment for these children to express and work through their feelings is essential to prevent harmful effects, such as behavioural issues and physical symptoms (Look 2018, 135–136).

Cultural and societal factors also shape how grief is expressed and understood. Social norms and societal changes play a crucial role in regulating the expression of grief (Pulkkinen 2017, 16, 50). In Finland, traditions of grieving based on these social and cultural norms and expectations significantly influence how sorrow is articulated, even among children (Pulkkinen 2016). Understanding these dimensions is vital for social work practitioners, who must address children's sorrow from both social and psychological perspectives. Pulkkinen (2016) argues that Finnish grieving is deeply shaped by cultural norms and societal contexts, making it distinctively reserved and understated. Pulkkinen's research suggests that these traits are linked to Finland's evolving 'death culture', where societal expectations and psychological frameworks sometimes fail to address the holistic nature of

grief. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding grief as more than a psychological process – it is a dynamic interplay of emotions, actions, and cultural narratives. In this study, I claim that children’s sorrow and Finnish grief tradition are intertwined: children, influenced by their immediate social and cultural environment, may adopt the same restrained patterns for manifesting sorrow as the adults around them.

Research question, data, and methods

This article examines professionals’ interpretations of children’s sorrow encountered in social work. The research question is, *How do professionals interpret children’s sorrow in social work?* It focuses on understanding the types of sorrow that children manifest in encounters with social workers and how the different types are perceived.

To gather the data, five focus group interviews were conducted with social work professionals in Finland as part of the Children’s and young people’s sorrow and grief in family and close relationships (CHYGS) project, in which children’s and young people’s own experiences of grief and sorrow, as well as professionals’ ability to respond to the needs related to children’s grief are examined. The project has collected qualitative interview data from children, young people, and professionals working with them, as well as questionnaire data that has been analysed using quantitative methods. The interviews in this particular study were held from January to June 2022, and a total of 17 social workers participated in them. In recruiting the participants, they were offered a number of interview times to choose from, allowing them to register based on their availability. This method was intended to capture a broad, representative view of the phenomenon, bringing in varied perspectives from professionals across different child-related fields. The recruitment was also subject to organizational requirements that prevented direct contact between the researcher and potential interviewees, adding a layer of confidentiality to the process. The focus groups are described in Table 1.

The interviews posed challenges related to participant diversity. I used a heterogeneous grouping approach, including social workers from child and family social work, child protection, crisis services, family work, and legal services, to capture broad perspectives on children experiencing sorrow. This diversity enriched the data but sometimes caused misunderstandings due to differing terminologies and priorities (Jenkinson et al. 2019). Power imbalances also appeared, with more experienced participants occasionally dominating discussions, requiring active facilitation for inclusive participation (Femdal and Solbjør 2018). Professional roles varied, from brief crisis interventions to long-term support, likely affecting the depth of reflection on children’s experiences. Conducting focus groups with pre-existing professional teams added challenges, as familiarity could strengthen discussions but also reinforce hierarchies and limit perspectives. As a researcher I needed to actively manage group dynamics and consider how established roles shaped the conversation. Despite these challenges, the method proved valuable for exploring complex emotional and professional experiences in social work.

The interviews were organized as thematic focus groups with three core themes: the manifestations of sorrow in children, strategies for working with children experiencing sorrow, and the social work methods applied in the participants’ organizations. The participants were primarily women,

Table 1. Participants and duration of the focus group interviews.

Interview	Duration	Pages of transcribed text	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
1	86 minutes	33	social worker	social worker	social worker	counselor	
2	88 minutes	27	social worker	family worker	social worker		
3	73 minutes	30	social worker	social worker	social worker	social worker	
4	82 minutes	26	social worker	counselor			
5	82 minutes	35	social worker	social worker	counselor	social worker	social worker

and all participants held either a master's or bachelor's degree in social work or social services and were licenced by the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health. Although their job descriptions varied, all roles involved working directly with children.

Following Morgan's (1996) guidelines, the focus groups encouraged an in-depth discussion to capture a range of insights and perspectives, which other interview formats might not provide (Morgan 1996). Each focus group comprised from two to five professionals who discussed the manifestations of children's sorrow, while the researcher's role was limited to facilitating inclusive participation. The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, transcribed by a transcription agency, and stored securely on a password-protected drive. Each session lasted a little under 90 minutes, resulting in 151 pages of transcribed material (Times New Roman, font size 12, line spacing 1.5).

Ethical aspects of the study

The data were collected as a part of Children's and young people's sorrow and grief in family and close relationships (CHYGS), and the University of Jyväskylä University research ethics committee reviewed and gave a favourable statement on the study. In addition, each organization participating in the research gave a written permit for the data collection. The interviewees also gave their written consent to the interviews, and they were informed about the study both in writing before the interviews and verbally at the beginning of the interviews. They were notified that participation was voluntary, they had the right to refuse to participate and they could withdraw at any time. The data were transcribed and contained no identifying data. They were also processed in such a way that no locality- and organization-specific information was reported. Consequently, the situations of children and families have not been addressed to avoid identifying them. Care was also taken to ensure that no participant can be identified based on the text. In the analysis, over-interpretation was avoided and data extracts were only used for valid reasons to elucidate the context. All stages of the research process were carried out in compliance with the ethical principles of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (see TENK 2019).

In the interviews, the social workers discussed emotionally burdensome issues that they face at work. After the interviews, they were given the opportunity to stay on and discuss their work experiences with the researcher. Some of the interviewees took this opportunity but these conversations are not part of the research data. The interviewees were also offered the opportunity to contact the researcher later if they felt they wanted to discuss the feelings evoked by the interview and its topics.

Analysis

As this study focuses on understanding *social workers'* interpretations of sorrow in children, its intention is not to reach children's actual emotions. The analysis examines how social workers interpret children's expressions of sorrow in encounters with children experiencing grief and sorrow. In the group interviews, the social workers discussed various client situations in which the child, according to their interpretation, manifested grief and sorrow. In these discussions, the social workers described different life situations that had evoked grief and sorrow in the child, for example, divorce, experiences of loneliness, moving to another place or being in foster care. The aim is to explore how social workers perceive and make sense of the various types of grief and sorrow experienced by children, and how the expressions of these emotions are presented to and understood by the social worker. The purpose is not to capture the authentic experiences of children themselves but to examine social workers' perspectives and interpretations. By adopting the lens through which social workers view and respond to these manifestations of grief and sorrow, the study sheds light on the ways in which professional understanding shapes their approaches to supporting grieving children.

Table 2. Means, forms and definitions of children's sorrow.

Means	Form	Definition
professional doesn't identify sorrow	child's sorrow is unspoken	hidden sorrow
child cannot name sorrow		
child expresses sorrow with delay	child's sorrow is invisible	
child expresses sorrow indirectly		
child's sorrow shows as another emotion		
child hides sorrow	child's sorrow is physical	unrecognizable sorrow
child's sorrow is expressed through behavioral symptoms		
child's sorrow is expressed as somatic symptoms	child's sorrow is complex	
child's sorrow is shallow		
child's sorrow is undulating		
child's sorrow is layered		

I examined the data using qualitative content analysis, a widely used method for analysing interview data focused on a particular phenomenon (Patton 2014). The analysis was conducted in five phases with the support of Atlas.TI software. *In the first phase*, I identified all passages in the data that addressed children's grief and sorrow. I focused on locating both explicit and implicit references to how grief manifests in children, particularly as perceived and described by professionals. There were about 60 such passages in the interviews, some of which were long, multi-sentence long and rich descriptions of the child's grief, and some of which were concise and very clear one-sentence descriptions. *In the second phase*, my attention turned to the ways in which professionals described the expression of a child's grief. I identified 11 distinct means through which grief was expressed, as reflected in the professionals' narratives. *In the third phase*, I began the process of typification, grouping these 11 means into broader categories based on observable patterns and thematic similarities. *In the fourth phase*, these means were synthesized into four overarching forms of children's grief. These forms represent qualitatively different ways in which children's sorrow manifests and becomes visible (or remains invisible), as interpreted by social workers. My objective at this stage was to capture and describe these forms as they were presented to and perceived by professionals.

In the final phase, I developed two conceptual definitions that characterize the manifestation of sorrow in children: hidden sorrow and unrecognizable sorrow. These conceptualizations share a connection in that they both relate to children's social relationships and life events (see Jakoby 2012), yet they diverge in important ways. Hidden sorrow highlights the child's agency and capacity to conceal grief, whereas unrecognizable sorrow is not articulated directly but emerges through indirect or alternative modes of expression. Both forms are notably characterized by their non-verbal nature (see Lipponen and Pursi 2022). The phases of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

Results

The results of the study present social workers' interpretations of children's sorrow. These interpretations are drawn from group interview discussions concerning the participating social workers' encounters with and experiences of children dealing with sorrow. Based on the interviews, the social workers have had many experiences of situations involving sorrow. The aim of the study is to increase our understanding of children's sorrow faced by social workers in their profession in terms of the way the workers interpret it and the way they perceive its manifestations.

In the analysis I identified two definitions of children's sorrow: hidden sorrow and unrecognizable sorrow. Hidden sorrow manifests in two forms. The first is unspoken sorrow, which occurs when professionals fail to identify the sorrow, the child cannot name or articulate it, or the child expresses it with a delay. The second form is invisible sorrow, where the child expresses their sorrow indirectly, sorrow manifests as another emotion, or the child intentionally hides it. Unrecognizable sorrow also has two forms. The first is physical sorrow, expressed through behavioural symptoms or

somatic (physical) symptoms. The second is complex sorrow, which can be shallow and surface-level, undulating and fluctuating over time, or layered, involving multiple intertwined aspects. These findings reveal the complex and nuanced ways in which children's sorrow may remain unseen or misunderstood.

Hidden sorrow

Based on the analysis, the social workers often interpret children's sorrow as being hidden in different ways, even though the workers recognize the situations that caused it. They also considered working with clients who experience sorrow to be one of the core tasks of social work, where professionals attend to those who have the fewest opportunities to seek help for their sorrow (Bevan and Thompson 2003, 179–182). Regarding the two main themes of my analysis, that is, children's hidden and unrecognizable sorrow, the social workers' interpretations support the idea that children manifest hidden sorrow more strongly since it highlights the child's own agency and choices. Hiding one's sorrow occurs both consciously and unconsciously.

The social workers described children's hidden sorrow in two different forms. First, they discussed the way it remains *unspoken* for many reasons. Consequently, professionals may not be aware of it and children may not name it. Second, they noticed *invisible* sorrow in the children, which means that the child expresses it indirectly or through some other emotion or hides it altogether. The social workers considered these ways of expressing sorrow not only from the professional viewpoint but also from the viewpoint of the children's agency. They recognized sorrow as a part of life (cf. Lipponen and Pursi 2022) and as a part of social work (cf. Pomeroy, Hang Hai, and Cole 2019), but despite these principles, they also recognized situations in their work where children's sorrow is not identified. The social workers shared the view that children rarely have the means to talk about sorrow, which the following quote describes well:

... by speaking about it directly, it can be difficult, we just talked about how it looks, so I think that just speaking about it can be more difficult. And I think that children's sorrow might be hidden from us sometimes, because they are not able to speak about it. (P8)

In the interviews, the social workers reflected on the fact that nowadays children are under external pressure to identify and verbalize emotions. In their view, recognizing emotions is linked to the child's age and level of development. Not all children necessarily have the ability to recognize emotions by themselves, let alone express them to someone else. According to the social workers, it is important that a child's emotional skills are not equated with those of an adult.

On the other hand, I was thinking about how well young people and children can recognize those feelings. Sometimes a question like 'how do you feel?' can seem very absurd to a young person. They are just like, how, how should I feel here? They can't say it. They are not like adults. We know how to say, 'I'm sad', 'I feel anxious', 'I miss you'. Children and young people do not necessarily know how to recognize their feelings, and they can feel too much pressure from the outside, too, when they are told you have to say how you feel. (P13)

Based on the analysis, it seems that in social work, children's sorrow typically does not become apparent at the moment of the event that causes it, but appears after a delay. According to the social workers, a delayed manifestation of sorrow means that a suitable time, place and situation need to be available for it to be dealt with. In such cases, the professionals saw that the child's situation might have changed so that they were encouraged to talk about their sorrow.

Social workers also interpret children's sorrow as invisible. Based on the analysis, especially young people who hide and ignore their feelings and experiences may manifest them as behavioural disorders or risky behaviour and direct their pent-up emotional states towards other people. Sorrow may also be reflected in poor outcomes at school, when a child spends all their time and energy going through the feelings of anxiety and guilt typical of young people's sorrow (Torbic 2011, 72).

And after how much delay is it possible for that behavior to show up? It can be a long time, it can be very confusing and hard to know what the child is reacting to just then when they react to something. And it varies. (P4)

However, the social workers think that the way their work is done and the resources are organized also causes sorrow to remain hidden. According to them, the work practices do not support the recognition of children's sorrow even though it should be part of their job (cf. Penzo and Harvey 2008). The interviewed professionals worked in quite different roles, and the time spent with each child varied depending on the role, but during the process of evaluating the need for services, for example, children's sorrow was typically not discussed – only clues of it could be discerned.

But in my opinion, it could be that during evaluation of the need for services, we also notice that, or we already know when a child is really withdrawn. (P8)

Overall, the social workers' desire to know the children they worked with was emphasized in the interviews. Knowing the children was described as a prerequisite for all social work. It is especially important in situations where children do not express their feelings directly. The professionals spoke of different indirect manifestations of children's sorrow. Seeing past such indirect manifestations and understanding that the root cause may indeed be sorrow is not possible if proper conditions for long-term work have not been created. Social workers need to reach a level where they know the factors that affect a child's everyday life.

But they can react in such a way that in their free time they can't control what happens around them, there is unlimited behavior, drugs, possibly crimes, changes in the circle of friends. (P4)

When children's sorrow is hidden, it is also possible that they express it through some other emotion (cf. Fineran 2012). The social workers identified two dimensions of this type of sorrow. On the one hand, the child's sorrow can manifest itself through another emotion and, on the other hand, professionals working with the child may not talk about the feeling and name it using the right terms. With regard to children not expressing sorrow as a pure emotion but rather indirectly through some other emotion, the social work professionals discussed the shamefulness of a sorrow-causing event.

It may remain hidden, and it may be that they want to cover it up. If it is not recognized in some way, or if it is perceived as a shameful or foreign feeling in some way, then it can remain hidden. (P12)

Grieving children may be sad, depressed, or angry. This needs to be considered in all social work with children, but especially when they are in foster care (cf. Fineran 2012, 370). According to my analysis, if a child expresses sorrow through another emotion, that emotion is often fear or anger. The social workers who participated in the interviews stated that children can feel hatred towards many things (Fineran 2012). It is also typical for hatred to be targeted at something else other than the subject at hand (cf. Fineran 2012, 370). Another emotion which emerged from the data was fear, behind which sorrow is often hidden. According to the social workers, this emotion in children can sometimes be masked grief. In the following quote, a foster care social worker describes a child's means of expressing sorrow:

But then I think that sorrow is often hidden behind fear. I think that children in our foster care have terrible fears, that their mother will change. One of the children's symptoms is that when the mother's hair color changes in between meetings, the mother is no longer the same. And he has, in a way, I think it's the sorrow of not knowing his mother. And at the same time there is the fear that the mother will distance herself. It is related to hair dyeing, which in itself would probably be nothing to a normal child living in a family. But for children in foster care, very small things can somehow highlight what they lack. (P16)

Sorrow can be a sensitive topic and require a subtle approach. Many people avoid talking about it directly, especially if they don't know the person they are talking to very well or if the subject is very personal. In particular, the sorrow encountered in social work is related to social relationships (cf.

Jakoby 2012); many children that the social workers work with have encountered a number of sorrow-causing events in their lives. The interviews revealed that since sorrow involves personal experiences, it sometimes takes time to recognize that a child is trying to express sorrow, making it is difficult even for professionals to verbalize or name it. In these situations, the professionals have ended up describing sorrow through its various manifestations instead of portraying it as a pure emotion.

But the fact that someone would say that the child is grieving, I probably don't see any of that. Whether it is a counselor from the institution, a family nurse, or a loved one, they don't say that the child is grieving. It is always mentioned using a different name. But if you dig into it a little more, it can be found. I think that sorrow is somehow a pretty pure feeling and it's somehow such a peaceful feeling. Before we get to the fact that that peaceful, pure sorrow can come from there, it takes an awful lot of time. (P16)

The sorrow that social workers encounter in children is therefore sometimes perceived as hidden. The interviewed social workers reported that it is difficult for children to express sorrow in words. They also noted that hidden sorrow is invisible, which in turn means that children try to conceal it or express it through some other emotion as a choice of their own agency. In such cases, sorrow typically manifests as anger. The social workers considered the children's sorrow not only from the professional viewpoint but also from the viewpoint of the children's agency. They acknowledged sorrow as part of life events (cf. Lipponen and Pursi 2022) and its identification as part of social work (cf. Pomeroy, Hang Hai, and Cole 2019).

Unrecognizable sorrow

The professionals described many reasons why they may not recognize children's sorrow. The term *unrecognizable sorrow* refers to an emotion that is expressed in ways that are visible but may not be immediately associated with sorrow. The key characteristic of this sorrow is its clear and visible manifestation. According to my analysis, this type of sorrow has two dimensions – a *physical* and a *complex* one. The physical manifestation of a child's sorrow involves either a behavioural reaction (see Fineran 2012) or somatic symptoms (see Bugge et al. 2014). Complex sorrow consists of delayed, undulating and layered emotions.

Children who have experienced traumatic life events also typically experience sorrow and uncertainty regarding what happens next. Various behavioural reactions caused by such events and emotions are quite common, and it is important that social workers do not rush to diagnose the child but try to find out the real reason for the symptoms (Fineran 2012). The participating social workers described that sorrow in children very often manifests as behavioural reactions. Various psychological reactions are normal consequences of sorrow (De Stefano et al. 2021), but they may not necessarily be identified as sorrow-related in social work. The behavioural reactions described by the social workers varied.

And there can be complete opposites. It can be an extreme rampage or ... (P2)

Aggressiveness even. It can be loss of appetite, wetting themselves, self-harming. (P3)

In addition to behavioural reactions, a child's sorrow can manifest as various somatic symptoms. Within the physical dimension of sorrow, the child's age matters, as a small child will probably express their sorrow more often through behaviour and bodily manifestations than verbally. The different somatic symptoms of sorrow identified in previous research include, for example, headache, stomach ache, muscle tension, loss of appetite, insomnia, restlessness and fatigue (Sood et al. 2006). As the social workers in this study also recognized these symptoms in children, the results of this study support previous research.

And then I think that you should probably also react to the somatic symptoms of these children. I think that sorrow, when it can't be let out, and also similar kinds of strong emotions, when they are left to fester, they cause an awful lot of children to have headaches, we have children with migraines, we have children with stomach symptoms, we have children with eating disorders. (P17)

In the interviews, the social work professionals stated that children's sorrow appears in waves. By this they meant that manifestations of sorrow in children changed over time. Undulating sorrow does not occur at a fixed time and place but comes and goes and involves different associated dimensions. During evaluation of the need for services, the social work professional may recognize various behavioural reactions in the child, but since the work is done over a short period of time, there are no opportunities for a more in-depth investigation of the matter.

You can see it a lot and, of course, it's also very normal that it comes in waves and in some way . . . Maybe it can also be confusing for some, it's not the same steady state of being, but sometimes it's sad as if you're grieving, so it will pass. (P12)

When discussing the ways in which a child's sorrow manifests itself, the social work professionals pointed out children's basic needs. They saw that in some situations, a child might express feelings of sorrow when their basic needs are not being met and that in such cases, the child's behaviour may communicate information about the child's feelings, including sorrow.

Well, [we look at] what's missing. If you have a small child as a client, then what is missing? It tells you, or at least somehow guides you to think about what is missing in this situation or in this child's behavior. (P3)

According to the participants, identifying the causes of children's sorrow requires knowing the child. Even if the professional perceives that situations causing sorrow in the child accumulate, the sorrow may still go unnoticed because the child tries to divert people's attention and decides not to talk about it. As sorrow-causing events accumulate, the child may end up looking for extreme solutions.

Well, in my case, when this young person died, or committed suicide, it was precisely him who hid it [the grief], and it was not dealt with, and it was not noticed. It was exactly the same situation, because it usually led to the same state of being, and it also had to be dealt with because no one else noticed. He then went to another place to study and then stayed alone so much that he didn't talk and always sent me the same messages saying he wasn't doing well and everything else and then it was too hard. (P6)

The professionals recognized that children do not have the same means to deal with sorrow as adults. When it comes to loss, children experience a wide range of emotions, but it can be difficult for them to understand them. For some children, events that cause sorrow accumulate and increase the challenges involved in processing them. The social work professionals had learned that sorrow-causing events in children's lives sometimes accumulate and lead to cynicism, making sorrow to constantly re-emerge as part of social relationships (cf. Jakoby 2012). Therefore, especially in the context of foster care, the temporariness of the child's relationships should also be considered (Brinkmann 2019b). Children in foster care can therefore experience many different losses, causing their sorrow not only to accumulate but also to become layered.

I had a young person as a client who had experienced a lot of suicides and one of them was a brother, and all in all there were eight suicides. And then he took them seriously, retreated into drugs and other things. When the seventh and eighth suicides happened, he said he didn't feel anything anymore. (. . .) Somehow it seems that we have a certain amount of endurance, and then the person just starts to become cynical. (P9)

Based on my analysis, identifying children's sorrow in social work involves various challenges. Unrecognizable sorrow in children may reveal itself in different visible ways, but it can be so well-disguised that it is difficult for a social worker to recognize and label it. This makes it challenging to provide effective help.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored social workers' interpretations of children's sorrow, seeking to answer the following research question: *How do professionals interpret children's sorrow in social work?* The study aims to understand the types of children's sorrow identified in social work and the ways in which they appear in professional encounters. Finnish social work professional have recognized that they encounter sorrow in their work. However, the sorrow is very rarely a 'pure' emotion that is clearly named by the child, but instead it manifests in different forms. Based on the data, I have defined *hidden* and *unrecognizable* sorrow as the main types of children's sorrow encountered by social workers. These two types illustrate the diversity and elusiveness of the phenomenon.

According to the interpretations of the social workers in this study, hidden sorrow takes the forms of unspoken and invisible sorrow. These forms emphasize children's agency in relation to sorrow. The social workers further interpret that children's unrecognizable sorrow is visible as physical and complex sorrow. In these cases, children express their sorrow in other ways than as a pure emotion. For social work professionals to recognize the different manifestations of children's grief and sorrow, they need to know the child and recognize the life events that could have caused the emotion.

One of the purposes of social work is to recognize various difficult emotions (Penzo and Harvey 2008). As previous research acknowledges, social work professionals' expertise includes creating safe spaces for children to express their grief, offering age-appropriate counselling, and facilitating support groups that promote healing through shared experiences including working with emotions (Griese et al. 2017). It is therefore important to ask whether Finnish social work practice offers enough tools for recognizing children's sorrow. The children encountered by professionals in their work have different sorrow-related needs. Although social work plays an essential role in recognizing a child's sorrow (see Penzo and Harvey 2008; Pomeroy, Hang Hai, and Cole 2019), it is challenging in many ways. While grief and sorrow as such do not necessarily signify a need for services, but are rather the consequence of a life event that caused the child to become a social work client, it is also not clear which professionals would be best suited to respond to the child's grief and sorrow-related needs. Because of this, the grieving child may end up being referred from one professional to another. It is therefore essential to focus on the identification of children's emotions and the work practices involved. This perspective also connects with Hochschild's (1979; 1983) theories of *emotion work* and *emotional labour*, which emphasize how professionals must actively manage and regulate emotions – their own and those of others – in line with social and organizational expectations. In the context of social work, this means that recognizing children's sorrow involves not only understanding their grief but also engaging in ongoing emotional management as part of professional practice.

Children as social work clients need a safe environment in which to process their difficult emotions so that the help they are given can be as effective as possible (see Look 2018). Although previous research has shown that this is especially important for children in foster care (Fineran 2012; Look 2018), the idea can be generalized to concern social work more broadly. The role of adults, both those close to the child and professionals, in supporting a grieving child is important. The child can be supported, for example, by talking, playing, or using creative methods of expression. For this reason, there is a need to continue the development of work practices used in recognizing grief and sorrow.

This study reinforces earlier findings that highlight the urgent need to develop new approaches for social workers to recognize and respond to emotions in their practice (see O'Connor 2019), particularly in the context of sorrow and grief (Pomeroy, Hang Hai, and Cole 2019). It would be necessary to underscore that grief and sorrow, especially among children, represent a universal phenomenon that cuts across social contexts. Despite its prevalence, children's grief remains largely unrecognized and invisible within current social work frameworks, pointing to a significant gap in

both knowledge and practice. The findings illustrate that professionals often feel their current work environments and practices do not adequately support the identification or addressing of children's sorrow. This raises critical questions about the extent to which 'good grief work' is constrained or shaped by structural conditions – such as organizational limitations, policy priorities, and institutional culture – and to what extent it can be enhanced by strengthening the professional expertise of social work professionals themselves. In this study, social work professionals candidly shared their observations and experiences related to the sorrow of the children they have worked with. These narratives point to the need for future research to examine more deeply the life events connected to children's experiences of grief, in order to broaden our understanding of its social and psychological dimensions.

Furthermore, there is a need to consider how this issue is addressed in social work education. It would be important to explore how professional training can build readiness and sensitivity among future social workers to recognize and respond to grief in its various forms. This includes critically engaging with existing scientific models, which not only shape professional approaches but also influence how grief is understood more broadly within society (cf. Pulkkinen 2017). Strengthening this aspect of education could help diversify understandings of grief and lead to more compassionate and effective support practices. Ultimately, recognizing children's sorrow as a central, rather than peripheral, concern in social work practice demands both structural change and the advancement of professional competence. Only through addressing both dimensions can social work move towards more holistic and responsive grief work.

Limitations

In this study, the manifestations of sorrow in children are interpreted indirectly through the perspective of the social workers rather than the children themselves. This reliance on second-hand accounts may introduce biases, as the social workers' interpretations are shaped by their professional training, personal experiences, and cultural contexts. Additionally, the data was collected through focus group interviews, where group dynamics might have influenced the participants' responses. The varied backgrounds of the social workers may contribute to diverse insights but they may also limit the consistency of the interpretations. Finally, the absence of direct input from the children limits the study's capacity to fully capture their authentic experiences and emotions.

Acknowledgments

This study is a part of the Children's and young people's sorrow and grief in family and close relationships (CHYGS) - project, which is funded by the Research Council of Finland and Alli Paasikivi Foundation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Research Council of Finland and Alli Paasikivi Foundation.

ORCID

Paula Vainikka  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7912-6081>

Data availability statement

The participants in this study did not provide consent for their data to be shared publicly. Further information about the data and the study can be obtained from the corresponding author, [FF], upon reasonable request

References

- Bevan, D., and N. Thompson. 2003. "The Social Basis of Loss and Grief. Age, Disability and Sexuality." *Journal of Social Work* 3 (2): 179–194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173030032004>.
- Birenbaum, L. K., M. A. Robinson, D. S. Phillips, B. J. Stewart, and D. E. McCown. 1990. "The Response of Children to the Dying and Death of a Sibling." *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* 20 (3): 213–228. <https://doi.org/10.2190/DHKG-NMG8-FFR4-UFW9>.
- Boss, P. 1999. *Ambiguous Loss. Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brinkmann, S. 2019a. "Learning to Grieve: A Preliminary Analysis." *Culture & Psychology* 26 (3): 469–483. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X19877918>.
- Brinkmann, S. 2019b. "A Society of Sorrow: The Constitution of Society through Grief." *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 20 (2): 207–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2018.1521339>.
- Bugge, K. E., P. Darbyshire, E. Grelland Røkholt, K. T. Sulheim Haugstvedt, and S. Helseth. 2014. "Young Children's Grief: Parents' Understanding and Coping." *Death Studies* 38 (1): 36–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2012.718037>.
- Cohen, J. A., and A. P. Mannarino. 2011. "Supporting Children with Traumatic Grief: What Educators Need to Know." *School Psychology International* 32 (2): 117–131. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034311400827>.
- De Stefano, R., M. R. A. Muscatello, A. Bruno, C. Cedro, C. Mento, R. A. Zoccali, and G. Pandolfo. 2021. "Complicated Grief: A Systematic Review of the Last 20 Years." *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 67 (5): 492–499. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020764020960202>.
- Femdal, I., and M. Solbjør. 2018. "Equality and Differences: Group Interaction in Mixed Focus Groups of Users and Professionals Discussing Power." *Society, Health & Vulnerability* 9 (1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20021518.2018.1447193>.
- Fineran, K. R. 2012. "Helping Foster and Adopted Children to Grieve the Loss of Birthparents. A Case Study Example." *Family Journal* 20 (4): 369–375. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480712451230>.
- Goldsworthy, K. K. 2005. "Grief and Loss Theory in Social Work Practice: All Changes Involve Loss, Just as All Losses Require Change." *Australian Social Work* 58 (2): 167–178. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1447-0748.2005.00201.x>.
- Griese, B., M. R. Burns, S. A. Farro, L. Silvern, and A. Talmi. 2017. "Comprehensive Grief Care for Children and Families: Policy and Practice Implications." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 87 (5): 540–548. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000265>.
- Hochschild, A. R. 1983. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. 1979. "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure." *The American Journal of Sociology* 85 (3): 551–575. <https://doi.org/10.1086/227049>.
- Jakoby, N. R. 2012. "Grief as a Social Emotion: Theoretical Perspectives." *Death Studies* 36 (8): 679–711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2011.584013>.
- Jenkinson, H., P. Leahy, M. Scanlon, F. Powell, and O. Byrne. 2019. "The Value of Groupwork Knowledge and Skills in Focus Group Research: A Focus Group Approach with Marginalized Teens Regarding Access to Third-Level Education." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18:1609406919881853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919881853>.
- Kofod, E. H., and A. Køster. 2022. "Introduction." In *Cultural, Existential and Phenomenological Dimensions of Grief Experience*, edited by T. A. Køster and E. H. Kofod, 1–6. London: Routledge.
- Kübler-Ross, E., and D. Kessler. 2005. *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Life Through the Five Stages of Loss*. New York: Scribner.
- Laing, C., and N. Moules. 2015. "Children's Cancer Camps: A Way to Understand Grief Differently." *Omega - Journal of Death & Dying* 70 (4): 436–453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815572605>.
- Lamponen, T. 2022. "Kiireellisen Sijoituksen Päätöksenteko Osana Lastensuojelun Sosiaalityöntekijän Työtä. [Decision-making of emergency placement as a social worker's everyday work task] Doctoral Dissertation, Tampere University. Faculty of Social Sciences.
- Lipponen, L., and A. Pursi. 2022. "Children's Grief: Repertoires of Practices in Institutional Early Childhood Education and Care." *Mind Culture and Activity* 29 (3): 215–235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2022.2133144>.
- Look, A. 2018. "The Face of Grief in Foster Care." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 63 (1): 126–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167818812723>.
- Marcussen, J., L. Hounsgaard, P. Bruun, M. G. Laursen, F. Thuen, and R. Wilson. 2019. "The Divorced Family-Focused Care Model: A Nursing Model to Enhance Child and Family Mental Health and Well-Being of Doubly

- Bereaved Children Following Parental Divorce and Subsequent Parental Cancer and Death.” *Journal of Family Nursing* 25 (3): 419–446. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1074840719863918>.
- McFadden, P., A. Campbell, and B. Taylor. 2015. “Resilience and Burnout in Child Protection Social Work: Individual and Organizational Themes from a Systematic Literature Review.” *British Journal of Social Work* 45 (5): 1546–1563. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct210>.
- Mitchell, M. B. 2017. ““No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt”: Non-Death Loss, Grief, and Trauma in Foster Care.” *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal* 35 (1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-017-0502-8>.
- Morgan, D. L. 1996. “Focus Groups.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 22 (1): 129–152. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.129>.
- O’Connor, L. 2019. “How Social Workers Understand and Use Their Emotions in Practise: A Thematic Synthesis Literature Review.” *Qualitative Social Work* 19 (4): 645–662. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325019843991>.
- Olwit, C., M. Mugaba, C. P. Osingada, and R. C. Nabirye 2018. “Existence, Triggers, and Coping with Chronic Sorrow: A Qualitative Study of Caretakers of Children with Sickle Cell Disease in a National Referral Hospital in Kampala, Uganda.” *BMC Psychology* 6 (1): 50. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-018-0263-y>.
- Pabon, A., and V. Basile. 2022. “It Don’t Affect Them Like It Affects Us: Disenfranchised Grief of Black Boys in the Wake of Peer Homicide.” *Urban Review* 54 (1): 67–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-021-00605-2>.
- Parton, N. 2014. “Social Work, Child Protection and Politics: Some Critical and Constructive Reflections.” *British Journal of Social Work* 44 (7): 2042–2056. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu091>.
- Patton, M. Q. 2014. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods. Integrating Theory and Practice*. 4th ed. Sage Publications. <https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/qualitative-research-evaluation-methods/book232962>.
- Penzo, J. A., and P. Harvey. 2008. “Understanding Parental Grief as a Response to Mental Illness. Implications for Practise.” *Journal of Family Social Work* 11 (3): 323–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10522150802292616>.
- Pirskanen, H. 2023. “Children’s Grief Maps – Capturing Children’s Grief and Sorrow in Family and Close Relationships.” *Children & Society* 38 (4): 1059–1075 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12783>.
- Pomeroy, E. C., A. Hang Hai, and A. H. Cole Jr. 2019. “Social Work Practitioners’ Educational Needs in Developing Spiritual Competency in End-of-Life Care and Grief.” *Journal of Social Work Education* 57 (2): 264–286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1670306>.
- Protivnak, J., H. Scott, E. Herman, and D. Matos. 2020. “Addressing the Unrecognized Grief of Elementary Students Experiencing Relationship Loss.” *Journal of School Counseling* 18 (28): 1–20.
- Pulkkinen, M. 2016. *Salattu, Suoritettu Ja Sanaton Suru – Läheisen Menettäminen Kokonaisvaltaisena Kokemuksena* [Concealed, Completed and Unspoken Grief - The Holistic Experience of Losing a Loved One]. University of Helsinki.
- Pulkkinen, M. 2017. *Surun Sylissä. Suomalaisten Kokemuksia Menetyksestä* [In the Arms of Grief. Finns’ Experiences of Loss]. Kustantamo S&S. Helsinki.
- Quinn-Lee, L. 2014. “School Social Work with Grieving Children.” *Children & Schools* 36 (2): 93–103. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdu005>.
- Quiñones, G., L. Lipponen, M. Barnes, and A. Pursi. 2021. “Everyday Manifestations of Children’s Grief and Grieving in Early Childhood Education and Care.” *Early Child Development & Care* 192 (11): 1786–1799. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2021.1934464>.
- Quiñones, G., L. Lipponen, A. Pursi, and M. Barnes 2022. “Children’s everyday manifestations of grief and grieving in early childhood education and care.” In *Early Child Development and Care*, 1786–1799. Vol. 192. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2021.1934464>. (11).
- Rando, T. A. 1993. *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Riely, M. 2003. “Facilitating Children’s Grief.” *The Journal of School Nursing* 19 (4): 212–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10598405030190040601>.
- Samuels, G. M. 2009. “Ambiguous Loss of Home: The Experience of Familial (Im)permanence Among Young Adults with Foster Care Backgrounds.” *Children & Youth Services Review* 31 (12): 1229–1239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.05.008>.
- Shear, M. K. 2012. “Getting Straight About Grief.” *Depression and Anxiety* 29 (6): 461–464. <https://doi.org/10.1002/da.21963>.
- Sood, A. B., A. Razdan, E. B. Weller, and R. A. Weller. 2006. “Children’s Reactions to Parental and Sibling Death.” *Current Psychiatry Reports* 8 (2): 115–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-006-0008-0>.
- TENK Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. 2019. *Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK). 2019. The Ethical Principles of Research with Human Participants and Ethical Review in the Human Sciences in Finland. Helsinki: TENK. Helsinki.*
- Thompson, N., J. Allan, P. A. Carverhill, G. R. Cox, B. Davies, K. Doka, L. Granek, et al. 2016. “The Case for a Sociology of Dying, Death and Bereavement.” *Death Studies* 40 (3): 172–181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2015.1109377>.
- Torbic, H. 2011. “Children and Grief: But What About the Children?” *Home Healthcare Nurse* 29 (2): 67–77. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NHH.0b013e31820861dd>.