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### Preface

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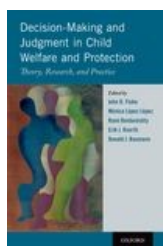
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## Decision-Making and Judgment in Child Welfare and Protection: Theory, Research, and Practice

John D. Fluke (ed.) et al.

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FRONT MATTER

## Preface

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Professionals working in child welfare and child protection are making decisions with crucial implications for children and families on a daily basis. The types of judgments and decisions they make vary and include determining whether to substantiate a child abuse allegation, whether a child is at risk of significant harm by parents, and whether to remove a child from home or reunify a child with parents after some time in care. These decisions are intended to help achieve the best interests of the child. Unfortunately, they can sometimes also doom children and families unnecessarily to many years of pain and suffering.

Judgments and decisions in child welfare and protection are based to a large extent on the formidable knowledge base on child abuse and neglect created over the years to support this professional task. Nevertheless, making decisions in complex and uncertain environments is fraught with many difficulties and shortcomings. There are in fact many indications that decisions in this area are not reliable and that many errors in judgment could be avoided had the decision-makers relied on existing knowledge on decision-making under uncertainty and followed appropriate procedures. Much needs to be improved on how these decisions are made by individual professionals and child welfare agencies.

Surprisingly, despite the central role of judgments and decision-making in professional practice and its deep impact on children and families, child welfare and protection training and research programs have paid little attention to this crucial aspect of practice. Furthermore, although extensive knowledge about professional judgment and decision-making has been accumulated in relevant areas such as medicine, business administration, and economics, little has been done to help transfer and translate this knowledge to the child welfare and protection areas.

p. xii Fortunately, a growing awareness of the need to expand our knowledge and improve practice in this area has been recognized in recent years. For instance, the four editors of this book published, in 2015, the first-ever special issue on decision-making in child welfare and protection (*Child Abuse & Neglect*, Vol. 49, 2015). That special issue, “Decision-Making and Judgments in Child Maltreatment Prevention and Response” (Fluke et al., 2015), aimed at presenting research focused on how context and decision-maker behaviors impact child protection systems’ decision-making and how such knowledge might lead to improvements in decision-making. Moreover, since 2016, the European Scientific Association on Residential and Family Care for Children and Adolescents (EUSARF) includes a special track for decision-making scholarship that has received in its last two iterations (2016 and 2018, as of this date) more paper applications than any other track proposed in this conference. Also, the DARE Symposia on Decisions, Assessment, Risk, and Evidence in

Social Work, organized since 2010 by Ulster University (Belfast, Northern Ireland), and the Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group (DARSIG) of the European Social Work Research Association, which has been formally established since 2014 ([https://www.eswra.org/decisions\\_sig.php](https://www.eswra.org/decisions_sig.php)), are part of efforts to elevate interest and scholarship in this important area. Thus, although this area has not received enough attention in the past, our sense is that it is gaining increased awareness. In this sense, we believe that, in order to improve decision-making in the field of child welfare and protection, we have the important task to make accessible the recent knowledge gains to scholars, educators, practitioners, and policy-makers dedicated to protecting children and improving their well-being.

This book represents our aspiration to fill this critical gap in the child welfare and protection research agenda while providing an up-to-date resource for practitioners and policy-makers. It is our purpose to provide the reader with ideas, methods, and tools that will improve the reader's understanding of how context and decision-maker behaviors affect child welfare and protection decision-making and how such knowledge might lead to improvements in decision-making.

This book is thus intended for academic researchers and graduate students in social work, psychology, pedagogy, and related disciplines such as behavioral economics. Its development has already resulted in improvements to the academic programs and professional continuing education courses that some of its authors teach regularly at their respective universities. We hope that this book becomes a foundational resource for undergraduate and graduate courses at other universities worldwide. The fact that it provides context and insight from a range of authors from around the world whose work focuses on a range of child welfare systems might make it a more enriching teaching tool suitable for different contexts. From a professional perspective, we also hope that child welfare managers, administrators, and senior practitioners will find this book an excellent resource for reflecting on their decision-making processes at personal, organizational, and policy levels.

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This book is organized into four major parts. Part I provides an introduction on frameworks and models in decision-making and judgment in child welfare and protection. It comprises two chapters. Chapter 1 lays out the key theoretical perspectives and historical overview of decision-making in child welfare and protection. Chapter 2 discusses the potential for using predictive analysis machine learning methods to support the complex and critical decisions professionals make on behalf of children and families.

Part II deals with the methodology for the study of decision-making in child welfare and protection. The empirical methods for studying decision-making in this field are the focus of Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents a variety of instruments developed to understand the child protective services decision-making processes.

In Part III we present two ecological models of decision-making in child welfare and discuss research using both frameworks. Chapters 5 and 6 present, respectively, the Decision-Making Ecology (DME) model and the model of Judgments and Decisions Processes in Context (JUDPiC). Chapters 7 through 10 outline new research evidence explicated in the context of the DME domains.

Part IV focuses on the practice of decision-making in child welfare and protection. Chapter 11 provides an overview of the use and usability of decision-making theory in child welfare policy and practice. Chapter 12 looks more closely at the voice of the child in child protection decision-making through a comparison of policy and practice in three European countries. The experience of teaching and learning decision-making in child welfare and protection social work is the subject of Chapter 13.

Finally, in Chapter 14, the editors of this book reflect on the future of the field and provide a series of reflections for policy, practice, and research.

John D. Fluke, Mónica López López, Rami Benbenishty, Erik J. Knorth, and Donald J. Baumann

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- p. xiv Fluke, J. D., López, M., Benbenishty, R., & Knorth, E. J. (Eds.). (2015). Decision-making and judgments in child maltreatment prevention and response. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 49(special issue), 1–162. doi:10.1016/S0145-2134(15)00392-0 ↵  
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