



## “Keeping balance”, “Keeping distance” and “Keeping on with life”: Child positions in divorced families with prolonged conflicts

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### ABSTRACT

A dominant storyline of divorced families in prolonged conflict is children portrayed as victims without agency. How does this fit with how children position themselves in prolonged post-divorce conflicts? In this qualitative study we pose the following research question; how do children position themselves to challenges in post-divorce family conflict, and how is family conflict positioning children? This paper draws on in-depth interviews with nine children (10–16) years old. Positioning theory is used as an analytic tool to explore child subject positions. Three dominant subject positions emerged in the analysis: keeping balance, keeping distance and keeping on with life. While our analyses show that prolonged conflict is oppressive to the family system, it is argued that each dominant position represents resistance against threats to the child's wellbeing, dignity and being a child in a family. Implications for child and family services with respect to separated families in prolonged conflict are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

In Norway, 25,000 children experience their parents' divorce and separation each year, and one of four children live in a family constellation other than with both of their parents (Statistics Norway, 2018). Although most families adjust successfully to the new family structure after 2–3 years of recovery from initial disruptions from the separation, it is estimated that 10–15% of separated households are characterized by parents in prolonged conflict (Hetherington, 2002; Mahrer, O'Hara, Sandler, & Wolchik, 2018; Thuen, 2004; Wiik, 2015). In Norway, all married and cohabiting parents with children under the age of 16 that separate are obligated to attend mandatory mediation, to write agreements on parental responsibilities and custody rights. Parents are also encouraged to give their children permission to participate in the mediation process (up to seven sessions), to voice their opinion (e.g. on their future living arrangements) or to promote psychosocial support during family transition (Thørnblad & Strandbu, 2018). However, although parents are encouraged to solve their issues in family mediation, a considerable number of custody disputes are brought to court. In 2014 and 2015, cases concerning custody and contact amounted to 16 per cent of all civil disputes in the Norwegian district courts (Bernt, 2018).

A dominant story in research is the negative effect of unresolved

conflict on the children's wellbeing and psychosocial health (P. T. Davies et al., 2016; Harold & Sellers, 2018; Zemp, Bodenmann, & Mark Cummings, 2016). Such is the evidence of adversely effects on children's mental health outcomes that the diagnostic condition 'child affected by parental relationship distress (CAPRD)' is introduced into the DSM-5, noting the risk of children e.g. amidst of parent conflicts in divorce and/or unfair disparagement of one parent by another (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016; Lorås, 2018). Prolonged conflict is more likely to be destructive post-divorce when one of the parents express their rage toward their former spouse by asking children to carry hostile messages, or by prohibiting mention of the other parent in their presence. Further, direct involvement of children in angry feuds on the phone or between parents in person increases the risk of children "feeling caught in the middle" (Afifi & McManus, 2010). These acts of hostility from parents are creating loyalty conflicts in their children and intolerable stress (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Child involvement in postdivorce conflict is more likely to happen in contact with each parent, than by direct exposure to their parents fights. Parents in prolonged conflict are prone to reveal negative information about the other parent to their adolescents (T. D. Afifi, McManus, Hutchinson, & Baker, 2007) in some cases due to lack in effective interpersonal skills (Amato & Rogers, 1997). Adolescents' perceptions of their parents' inappropriate disclosures is a stronger predictor of

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adolescents well-being than parents' perceptions of their own disclosures (T. D. Afifi et al., 2007).

The punctuation on risk, often portraying children within a victimizing discourse, positions children as passive victims of their parents in conflict. Other research endeavors have focused on children's ability to navigate these challenges and how they are able to draw on resources to withstand or cope with family conflict (Kerig, 2001; Miller, Lloyd, & Beard, 2017b). Some research endeavors have focused on the conflicted families' ability as a functioning system to be resilient—that is, with functioning parenting and good-quality child-parent relationships before and after separation (Ahrons, 2006; Amato, 2000; Chen & George, 2016; Masten, 2018; Miller, Lloyd, & Beard, 2017a; Walsh, 2016b). Although family conflict exposure is a risk for children, it has been argued that moderate conflict exposure followed by conflict resolution is an important part of family life and in children's development (P. T. Davies, Coe, Martin, Sturge-Apple, & Cummings, 2015). In this paper our attention is drawn to how family conflict is positioning children and how being a child means to take up available positions while navigating family life.

In navigating life in dual households, children can view their parent's relationship either as distant, unfriendly, conflictive or hostile and be aware of their parent's polarized positions in child-related matters such as child rearing, access rights or living arrangements (Bergman & Rejmer, 2017; Holt, 2016; Visser et al., 2017). Based on an evidence review of research on parental conflict, Harold and Sellers (2018, p. 378) argue that children's meaning making of parental conflict and the quality of their relationships to their parents is among the primary explanations of why some children exposed to family conflict experience significantly negative outcomes, whereas other children are resilient and experience little or no adverse effects. There are important age differences in children's meaning making of conflict, and how they respond. In early adolescents to adolescents, cognitive changes enable them to increasingly think more abstractly and understand their own and others' perspectives, such that they can reflect on their positions in social contexts (Miller et al., 2017a). Enhanced understanding both increases the risk of exposure to conflict e.g. more involved in family decision making (conflict exposure), detect signs of hostility/distress in parent (self-blame). Moreover, more nuanced capabilities to reflect also enhance the coping repertoire (e.g., distraction, seeking understanding from others) and capabilities (Miller, Kliever, & Partch, 2010). As with younger children, coping strategies of adolescents in post-divorce conflict is influenced by the presence of responsive parents that encourage social support.

Although prolonged conflict is threatening to the relational fabric of family life and children are in a pivot position as both risk bearers and informants, few research endeavors have to our knowledge explored children's constructions of life in these families. Children are often the center of attention in parental disputes; parents often claim to hold certain positions concerning their child, and these positions are part of a family discourse on what family members have "the right to" and what they "ought to" do (Harre & Slocum, 2003). Thus, when children talk about challenges in prolonged conflict families, their accounts of family life also entail knowledge of their capabilities in positioning themselves to address family challenges and of how they "ought to" position themselves as a child in a dual household family. Challenges or distress in postdivorce families could be characterized as ill-beings and an opposite construct to subjective wellbeing. Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000, p. 672) take up this point, and defines distress as; "subjective ill-beings that is; "negative emotions, evaluations of roles, and judgments of life satisfaction". Children's agency and meaning making is crucial to child adaptation in prolonged family conflict, there is little holistic and contextualized knowledge of how children construct and position themselves, with respect to the complexities of challenges in these family environments. In this study we pose the following research question; how do children position themselves to challenges in post-divorce family conflict, and how is family conflict positioning children?

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Positioning theory

To better focus on children's agency and their constructions of life in prolonged family conflict, we draw on elements from positioning theory (Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). According to R. Harré and Moghaddam (2003a), positioning theory is based on three main concepts: speech acts/acts, positions and storylines (the 'positioning triangle' in Harré and Moghaddam's words). The concept of "position" is a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role (Goffman, 1971). According to positioning theory, people are not passively given roles in which they interact with others but rather actively negotiate subject positions, which involve notions of who we are and what we can do. (B. Davies & Harré, 1990) state that when talking about life experiences, e.g., when a child speaks about family life, parts and characters are assigned both to themselves and to other people. Family life consists of ongoing communication, of acts or speech acts that are viewed as socially meaningful performances by the parties involved. R. Harré and Moghaddam (2003b) states that;

*"A position implicitly limits how much of what is logically possible for a given person to say and do and is properly a part of that person's repertoire of actions at a certain moment in a certain context (R. Harré & Moghaddam, 2003a, p. 5)."*

Positions involve reflexive positioning, in which the child positions himself and others (e.g., in talking about family life), and an interactive positioning, in which social episodes consist of people taking different positions. Positioning theory has often been adopted in studies of how conflict emerges and is maintained, ranging from conflicts involving clients and professionals up to conflicts between nations (Harré et al., 2009; Harre & Slocum, 2003; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). Few studies have employed positioning theory on family conflict (Bruno, 2018; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017), and to the best of our knowledge, no studies have employed positioning theory in understanding child perspectives on family conflict.

In our use of positioning theory and in our understanding of positions, we apply premises from systemic family theory because family members position themselves not only to individuals in the family but also to relationships involving dyads, triads and the family system as a whole (Bateson, 2002; Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Positioning theory within the metaframework of systemic theory, could be viewed as discursive proceedings based on different levels of positional negotiations, with mutual influence or feedback in the family system. One of the main tenets of the "cybernetic metaphor" in family systems theory are: the family system is motivated to maintain equilibrium or family homeostasis. Changes in one part of the family system must be followed by compensatory changes in other parts as an irreducible whole (Minuchin, 1974). Divorce is a transition to a binuclear family and the formations of two subsystems, that is separate but also interconnected to the larger family system (Minuchin, 1974; Walsh, 2010). An antecedent, like divorce, that activates family homeostatic mechanisms can be any type of causative change above the tolerable limit e.g. family conflict. We argue that in systemic theoretical perspective, prolonged family conflict across households could be viewed as antecedent positional meaning making, that is threatening or disturbs the processes of homeostasis, in developing boundaries and equilibrium in one or both households (Bateson, 2000; Kim & Rose, 2014; Minuchin, 1974).

In every social context, practice or situation there exists a 'realm of positions' in which people are located, and such positions are inescapably moral (Harré & Lagenhove, 1999, p. 6). They are moral in the sense of involving 'ought's' or moral obligation. Positions consist of rights to do certain things and act in specific ways and of duties to be taken up and acted upon in specific ways. In family life, different subject positions are negotiated, and how children understand the

situation can affect their perception of what subject positions are offered and available to them and whether they wish to claim or resist those positions. However, if one party possesses a superior position within a social context, certain positions might be imposed. Such uneven power relationships might be at stake for children in a family conflict. “Children’s positions” refers to the identities made relevant through specific ways of talking and is a notion that emphasizes the location of the child in discourse (Avdi, Callaghan, Andenæs, & Macleod, 2015; Avdi & Georgaca, 2009).

Family life displays an order that can be described by norms and established patterns of development, and such patterns have come to be known as storylines, typically ‘*expressible in a loose cluster of narrative conventions*’ (R. Harré & Moghaddam, 2003b). In a prolonged family conflict, family members can agree or disagree on what storyline is in play. One parent might view the family conflict as a “storyline of a fight for parent equality” and is ready to take up the position as the victim if he or she obtains fewer access rights to his or her child than does the other parent after separation (Cashmore & Parkinson, 2011). This storyline is positioning the other parent as an “oppressor”, as the one responsible for parent inequality, and the child is positioned “as an object/victim” of the parent’s lack of equality between households. The other parent might resist the positioning as an oppressor and promote the storyline as “A fight for the child’s rights of choice”, meaning that differences in parent access rights and living arrangements are a result of a child’s own choices and thus positioning the child as an “independent agent”, with both parents positioned as “neutral and supportive recipients” of the child’s preferred choice. Consequently, in this storyline, equality between parents in living arrangements is not a justified focus. Children might find their positioning in both storylines problematic, in the former case as an “object” of a parent’s decision making with ‘no say’ and in the latter case shouldering the burden of being “solely responsible” for their own living arrangements. Further, the two storylines represent two different discourses that is much debated in the field. One view is that divorce conflict is due to “unjust inequality” that is solved with the promotion equal parenting rights, and with shared custody as the norm. Another discourse is “welfare of the individual child”; that emphasize that custody rights and living arrangements should vary and promote the individual needs of the child (Lawick & Visser, 2015).

## 2.2. Concept of healthy resistance

In our understanding of child agency, we also draw on elements from Allan Wade’s concept of healthy resistance to understand how children act and mobilize their inherent resources when faced with challenges from prolonged family conflict. The theoretical concept of “healthy resistance” emphasizes that “*whenever persons are badly treated, they resist*” (Wade, 1997). Healthy resistance gives attention to what people do when they meet violence or other forms of oppression, more so than on the consequence of how it makes them feel (Överlien, 2017; Wade, 1997). Richardson and Bonnah (2015) states that child responses to oppressive behavior (e.g. violence/parenting conflict) can provide information about how to aid children in attempts to promote healing, recovery and well-being. We argue that prolonged family conflict could be viewed as oppressive positioning to the functions and positions of adults and children in the family system, causing children to mobilize resources and take positions, and consequently acts to resist. The concept of healthy resistance is related to other resource-oriented theories such as child and family resilience (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005; Masten, 2018; M. Ungar, 2001a; M. T. Ungar, 2001b; Walsh, 2016a) and salutogenesis (Antonovsky, 1979; Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988). Resource-oriented theories have in common that they try to explain how paths to good health and wellbeing are found in stressful and difficult life circumstances. Resilience, as a construct, acknowledge that some children and households struggle well, and gain competences from experiences of successfully mobilizing the necessary

resources to overcome distress. Laumann-Billings and Emery (2000, p. 684) stresses that that resilience is not invulnerability, and that; “successful coping often is tinged by short-term and long-term distress.” van Der Wal, Finkenauer, and Visser (2019) echoes this argument, and suggest that high-conflict divorce represents a risk for traumatic impact, and, at the same time, children demonstrate resilience. Healthy resistance, not only emphasize the importance of individual acts or responses of resistance. As in positioning theory, acts of individuals exist within a moral order of rights and duties. Children have rights to be cared for and parents have a duty to protect them from the turmoil of the conflict. The healing forces of resistance rest on the recognition, and positive social responses from other authorities’ figures that recognize violations and oppressive acts from individuals with responsibilities. E.g. when a parents give unfair disparagement of one parent by another, in front of the child, it is important to recognize this as oppressive acts from a responsible adult, rather than framing it as a consequence of coparental conflict. Therapist is an authority figures, that is able to both recognize oppressive acts and to frame child responses as resistance, and in so doing gives social responses that promotes dignity, recognition and healing (Wade, 1997). Especially younger children needs authority figures, preferable the parent themselves, that is able to validate their hurts and that their responses as justified acts to protest against oppressive parenting behavior (C. Richardson & Bonnah, 2015; Wade, 1997).

## 3. Methodology

In this paper we explored children’s constructions and meaning making of family life from the epistemological premise of social construction (Gergen, Lightfoot, & Sydow, 2004; Gergen & Ness, 2016). When people state a belief and or express an opinion in a social context, they are taking part in a conversation that has a purpose and in which all participants have a stake (Ness, 2011; Smith, 2015, p. 144). In other words, when family members tell their story about family challenges, it is important to view their story as a reflective performance or social action that reveals information about how they punctuate, construct and position themselves with respect to family life. Children’s meanings are contextually produced; it thus follows that interviews must be viewed as co-constructed, in which the interviewer interacts with the informant and meaning is produced together (Backe-Hansen & Frønes, 2018; Saywitz, Camparo, & Romanoff, 2010). A given experience can reflect one of several possible accounts, and these might vary depending upon when and where they are produced (Åkerlund & Gottzén, 2017).

### 3.1. Recruitment of informants

Children (9–16 years old) were recruited from a family counseling service in Norway. The project was approved in advance by the Regional Committee for Medical and Health Research Ethics in western Norway (Project 2016/1915). Information leaflets were distributed to participants of a child-inclusive resilience-oriented family therapy program (Strong Children in 2 homes) targeted at families in prolonged conflict with the following inclusion criteria:

- All families had a child 9 years or older.
- Parents had experienced more than 2 years of postseparation conflict or problems in coparenting.
- Parents had either child custody or access rights to their child.
- Parent’s relationship was conflictive, in a deadlock, distressful and viewed as unsolvable for their child or parent.
- Prior history existed of postseparation counseling, mediation, court attendance concerning coparenting problems or family conflict.
- Parent was not currently part of a child protection investigation or taking part in family mediation or court proceedings.

Seventeen families were invited to be part of the study. Of these, both parents from five families gave their assent to let their child participate. Adolescents 16 years or older gave their written assent to participate, on their own behalf. Although parents gave their consent on their children's behalf, the research protocol approved by ethical research committee emphasized that child participation was voluntary. Further, that first author would monitor, and terminate interviews if children showed signs of distress or reluctance to participate. In addition, first author had a meeting, prior to the interview, with each child with one parent present. Children and parents were then reminded that the study was voluntary, and that the child could end the interview at any time. All, children, except one, agreed to participate in the study.

### 3.2. Family demographics

The sample in this paper consists of interviews with nine informants (6 girls and 3 boys), from five families, conducted by the first author in 2017 and 2018. Four were early adolescents (ages 10–14) and five were adolescents (ages 15–16). All informants, except one, had siblings that also participated in the study. Children were informed that both parents participated as informants (findings planned published in future paper). On average their parents had lived six years in separate households. Household were from middle class background. In most households, one or both parents had a university college degree and one or both parents had a new cohabiting partner. At the time of the interview, most adolescents lived with one of their parents, while most early adolescents had shared custody arrangements spending equal time with both parents.

### 3.3. In-depth interviews with children at risk

Children in prolonged family conflict vary in their experiences of talking about family matters. Consequently, taking part in an interview exploring family life entails many considerations of how to facilitate a safe environment to conduct the interview. The first author was working as a family therapist at the place of recruitment as part of the duty work of a PhD scholarship but had no prior clinical involvement with the informants. The therapist's knowledge and experience provided vital insights into the phenomenon and context that were explored but could also represent preunderstandings that, if not reflected on, could hinder new insights (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009; McLeod, 2011). Reflexivity and discussions with the co-authors and research group were important throughout the research process.

Informants were given a choice of interview setting, either in a neutral setting (office) or in a familiar setting in one of their household residences. Without exception, all informants chose to be interviewed at home after school hours. All children were interviewed individually (by the first author) to reduce the risk of being enmeshed in other family members' positions and views on the conflict. To ensure that the child informants felt safe during the interview, one of the parents participated in a conversation prior to the interview to inform the children that both parents had given their written consent for the child's participation and for the child to speak freely about family life. One of the parents was close by during the interview. The timing of the interview was before the onset of therapy, with the hope that the therapy process would contribute with additional support.

To trigger the telling of stories of family life, the interviewer emphasized the wish to know more about the informant's experience of family life. An interview guide approved by the ethical research committee (REK), directed the interviewers probes along with the following themes; a) descriptions of the family b) sources of well-being; in general, in family c) resources/qualities in the family d) family relationships e) child and family beliefs about challenges/coping f) child and family beliefs about support/needs g) future hopes i) child and family needs from counselling.

Informants were told that their parents were interviewed. Also, that

siblings from the age of nine were invited with the intent that family involvement would empower children focus on their own perspective, knowing that; a) they had a relational permission to talk freely b) that all members would have a say. The interviewer took a position in a facilitative style, trying to emphasize and highlight informants' reflections in the conversation. Early adolescents were encouraged to draw pictures of their family households and family members. The interviewer was attentive to emotional and verbal expressions of informants during the interview to ensure that the child not only conceded to participate but also to be attentive to potential subjects that children might find disturbing or difficult. Participant's experiences of was assessed at the end of the interview, and difficult matters were brought to a closure. Each interview lasted from 30–70 minutes. A sound recording of each interview was later transcribed and supplemented with observation notes from the interview. Excerpts have been translated from Norwegian to English by the first author. To protect of the identity of participants, names of children and in some cases gender or kinship/roles of family members have been altered in the interview excerpts. Also, to hinder revealing identities' we applied age categories in the excerpts, informants that is 10–14 years are categorized as early adolescents (EA) and informants that is 15–16 years is referred to as adolescents (A).

### 3.4. Analysis

In analyzing the interview transcripts, we applied a constructive content and thematic-oriented approach supplemented with theory-informed analyses (Böttcher, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2018; Smith, 2015; Willig, 2014).

First, all transcripts were read and reread without any attempts to analyze the text. The next analytical stage was conducted with the use of theory-informed analyses, with concepts from positioning theory (Böttcher, 2018; Brinkmann, 2007, 2010; Harré et al., 2009; Schraube, 2015). In accordance with the research question, we focused our attention on children's constructions of challenges in the family that became apparent in the text. In reading over the interview transcripts, we used the concept of storyline as a "prism" to view the text (Böttcher, 2018; Jevne, 2017; Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). Although the 'positioning triangle' can be entered empirically at any of the verticals; "position", "speech act" or "storyline" ("loose cluster of narrative conventions") the latter is a recommended entry (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003a, p. 9). (further details on positioning theory, theory section 2.3). In reading transcripts, we asked analytically, in what dominant themes of storylines do children construct challenges in the family? In coding themes of storylines across the interview transcripts, the answer emerged as three dominant storylines as follows: a) family in conflict, b) the troubling parent, and c) life—as more than family challenges. First author coded most of the material in themes, all co-authors contributed in reading segments of the transcript, and in the process of discussing, developing, revising themes of storylines and dominant positions.

In the last analytical step, we asked with attention to the research question, what type of dominant child position is present in each of the three storylines? In answering this question, three dominant positions emerged, one connected to each storyline. In each dominant position, subpositions were constructed. The dominant positions and subpositions are presented in the finding chapter with excerpts from the interviews. In analyzing, we coined the term dominant position, emphasizing that each dominant position could be viewed as a meta-position to variations of subpositions children take in prolonged conflict families (Harre & Slocum, 2003). We also note that children's subject positions must not be viewed as static; children are flexible in how they position themselves because they can draw on more than one contextual storyline. A dominant position can therefore entail elements of other positions or subpositions.



#### 4. Findings: Three dominant subject positions

Overall, children's talk of family life was heterogeneous; some child informants described challenges that affected their life and wellbeing, whereas others talked about minor difficulties they were able to manage. Sibling respondents had in most cases different dominant subject positions, while in some cases they shared dominant positions but with different subpositions. Without exceptions siblings' stories of how it family challenges affected their life varied. Although the dominant positions children took varied, some of the positions were more typical for adolescents while other positions were typical of early adolescents. One dominant position emerged within each of the three dominant storylines: a) keeping balance (in the storyline of family conflict), b) keeping distance (in the storyline of the troubling parent) and c) keeping on with life with life (in the storyline of life—as more than family challenges).

In the following, each dominant position will be presented with subpositions and illustrated with excerpts from the interviews.

##### 4.1. Keeping balance in the family

Keeping balance was the most common position because all informants described how conflict was or had been present in family life. Children described how one or both of their parents had difficulties with talking, meeting or trusting each other, of parents arguing in the open and of masked hostility. The dominant storyline of family conflict brought a general awareness that family conflict represented a disturbance in the family system, and in some children, a dread of not being able to keep the balance or of being pulled into the turmoil of the conflict. Different aspects or subpositions of keeping balance emerged as staying out of conflict, as being the responsible one, and of staying silent will be presented and illustrated with interview excerpts. Early adolescents typically took the subposition staying out of conflict and staying silent, while adolescents typically took the position of being the responsible one.

##### 4.1.1. Staying out of conflict

The subposition of “staying out of conflict” as became apparent in Anne's (EA) account of how she become caught in her parents' conflict involving her older sister. Anne (EA) described how it is difficult to avoid getting caught in family conflicts:

“[...] But what it is, is that sometimes it is a little bit difficult. Cause' then it just like, if I talk with mum about something that's happened for instance with my big sister. Then it sounds quite OK, and when dad talks about it sounds very different, kind of. It is really difficult to choose who I ..., who I shall team up with. Sometimes it's just like that ... But usually when there something about sister then I say like, “Ok, so that's what's happened”. And then I kind of, try to not be a part of it, so that I don't have to ... kind of be mixed in, so that I have to ... for example mum and my big sister agree and then they want to talk to daddy; and he say for example “No” or is against it. Then it's kind of; them against him and then I would rather not be caught up in it, cause then there is three against one, or two against [...]”

Anne (EA) provides a fluent and assertive account of how she avoid taking sides in the conflicts. The importance of balance is emphasized in how she makes the conflict into a mathematical equation having an effect as though family members were positioned on a teeter totter swing; *Then it's kind of; them against him and then I would rather not be caught up in it, cause then there is three against one, or two against ...*. She speaks fast, and the text comes across as a statement that she is fine as long as there is a balance. She notes that *sometimes it is a little bit difficult* and she points to *teaming up as really difficult*, indicating that it is not the conflict itself but the threat of having to choose a side that is difficult. Statements in the initial part of the interview stresses the importance of family loyalty and connectedness, with proclamations that she has it

“*equally well*” with both her parents. When she was asked to elaborate on how being the youngest in one household and the oldest in the other affected her, she uses the opportunity to proclaim that it “*goes well*”, and to reject that “*she likes one place more than the other*”, leaving the impression of how important the stance of equilibrium is in the family. Anne comments; *Yes! I think goes quite well. It is like that I have it equally well with them both. So, it's not that I, kind of, feel that I like one place more than the other.* She provides a positive and confident account of managing a balance between parents and others in the family. She is aware of threat of conflict that might cause tension in her family, but she is also confident in her ability to keep balance and stay out of trouble. In positioning themselves as staying out of conflict, children make efforts to avoid taking sides in family arguments. Children resist invitations to give their opinions on conflictual topics; they avoid tipping the balance in the family as a whole.

##### 4.1.2. Being the one responsible

Being the responsible one is position where children struggle and often are unsuccessful in keeping a balanced position in the family. The latter might lead to feeling a heavy burden from being responsible for initiating conflict in relation to one of their parents or between parents. Marit (A) explains:

“... *It is always me that is involved, because it is I that think something, or does something that they have to ... It is always me causing the problems. Or something or another, No, not always but ... It is often me that decides to do something that makes them disagree.*”

Marit uses the phrase *decides to do something that makes them disagree*, leaving the effect of emphasizing how much she positions herself as the one responsible for her parents disagreeing about her. Other parts of the interview text leave the impression that she does not intend to initiate conflict, as the phrase “*decides to*” indicates, but that her parents blame her for their fights about matters concerning her. She identifies her own inability to be consistent while talking to her parents. When parents have polarized opinions, her changes of opinion are destabilizing, initiating disputes with her parents. Marit says, “[...] *I am trying to avoid it (initiating conflict), but sometimes then I forget things [...] and [...] Eh I am changing my opinion quite fast, yeah [...]*”. The pressure of being pulled between parents different expectations, makes her more uncertain. Marit feels unable to keep a balanced position; she is like the last pawn in a game of chess, under constant threat, and the divided wishes from her parent's forms a scissor grip around her. She feels unprotected and manipulated by her parents' polarized requests. Marit (A) reports:

“*I am trying, but it is kind of, not that easy cause daddy is always complaining about that mum manage to manipulate me and everything. And he is managing to do the same when he has a go at it. So then I become very quickly affected by them.*”

*I: Yes, yes, yes. So you perceive that you are being pulled into different ...*  
*Marit: Yes. Because it's like ..., if they want two different things, but ... and I really don't have any protection against it, then it's ...”*

Morten (A) talks of how it has been difficult for his sister to adjust to their parents' separation, and how this have caused conflicts in the family. As Morten (A) explains,

“*I know that ..., (his sister) don't like changes so. It has been very apparent when we were going to change these furniture's (pointing at the sofa), then she refused to, more or less. She really didn't want to. So, I think is almost the same. That she didn't want that we ..., that this (parents' separation) should happen. Because it is too much change for her.*”

*I: Ok*

*M: To short time, kind of. So she have been quite cranky then.*

Morten (A) explains how his sister is the responsible one, for acting out and for finding changes challenging. In saying this he emphasizes

that his sister is responsible for her own behavior.

Being the responsible one is difficult, because there is often a risk of not being able to keep the balance. To be in this position is a constant burden, not being able to be consistent, may lead to ambivalence in what choices to make. All potential actions may initiate conflict, and accusation from a parents of being easily manipulated, of not being truthful or of aligning with the other parent. In having difficulties to adjust to parent's separation, others in the family might blame you for the challenges in the family.

#### 4.1.3. Staying silent

During the interviews, it became apparent that some children found it difficult to talk about family life and of challenges in the family. The way they spoke left an impression that they were being invited into unknown territory, which made the interviewer tread carefully and avoid further probing questions. Early adolescents had in general, less experience of talking about family matters than their older siblings or adolescents. Some children reported that the ongoing conflicts between their parents were not something that they discussed with parents or other family members. Being silent was for them reflecting family members' silence about the conflict; keeping silent was how they acted to keep balance in the family.

In asking Trine (EA) about her parents' relationship, her response demonstrate how silence between parents resonates in silence about these challenges in the family. When drawing a family picture, Trine (EA) makes three short statements in the following order:

*"[...] They don't really talk with each other [...] I feel that they are angry at each other [...] We don't really talk that much about it [...]"*

Notes from the interview emphasize the impression that Trine felt uncomfortable and not accustomed to talking about family relationships or challenges in the family.

This impression is more implicit in the text, but Heidi (EA) provides some accounts of being in a silenced position in the family and of her inability to address family challenges without the help of professionals:

*"[...] I found it difficult before when ... I never talked to my mum or dad or anyone. So then we thought about talking to the public health nurse, and she thought it would be a good idea to contact the family counseling office. [...]"*

Recognizing the importance of her talking about the family, her mother sent her to the health nurse. She uses the word *never* and leaves the impression of not being able to talk to her mum, her dad or anyone.

Heidi (EA) further emphasizes the importance of her dad's involvement in talking about family challenges. She says,

*"[...] And then we went to the family counseling office, but dad would not be part of it. And then we did not go there that much. But, and then I went to the health nurse and the family counseling office at the same time. Then it was a bit back and forth since dad didn't want to be a part of it. Because it would not be the same if dad was not part of it. Because then they only get one of the stories and that is kind of wrong. So then, but we found this solution. So that's how it came to be that we came here, really [...]"*

In highlighting her father's absence in family counseling, she indicates the importance of his voice in talk about family challenges. Heidi feels that talk about family matters is a polyphonic family event; *"it's not the same if dad was not part of it"*. It feels wrong being the only one to give reports of family challenges and thus being positioned to "break the silence". She stresses the importance of a balanced account about the family; in being the only interlocutor, she is afraid that the therapist will *"only get one of the stories and that is kind of wrong"*.

It became apparent that staying silent was a common subposition of keeping balance. This position was often a reflection of how other family members positioned themselves vis-à-vis family conflict. Not talking about family life could be part of the parents' strategy to protect

children from family conflict, it might be because parents find it difficult to find balance between positive involvement and no involvement, or it could be too hurtful to talk about.

#### 4.2. Keeping distance

Many children felt that their main concern in the family was challenges related to a troubling relationship with one of their parents. When asked about what changes she would make in the family if she had a magical wand, Margit (EA) said: *Dad. He should understand how it is to be us*. Within storyline of a troubling parent, children often described several challenging experiences. Accounts of challenges in relation to their parent varied, from lack of emotional support and insight to being triangulated into family conflict and of having conflicts. Some children found that their troubled relationship with the parent always had been difficult, whereas others talked of challenges that developed after parents' separation. Some children hoped for improvement in their relationship, whereas others had little or no hope of change. In managing a troubling parental relationship, most children took a dominant position of keeping distance. Because parents in conflict distrust each other, children were reliant on their troubling parent's ability to change behavior or to take the initiative to improve their relationship. Some children had tried to change their parent's behavior or solve their differences without success. Often finding themselves on their own in these efforts, most children took a position of keeping distance to reduce the negative effects of challenges they were facing. Different aspects or subpositions of keeping distance emerged as moving out/reducing contact or aligning with the other parent. The subposition of moving out was more typical of adolescents than early adolescents and this was also the case in alienating with one parent.

##### 4.2.1. Moving out/reducing contact

Many adolescent informants described troubling relationship with one of their parents that led them to moving out, living more permanently with the other parent and spending less time with the troubling parent. Most early adolescents did not mention living arrangement as something that they were involved in discussing. Charlotte (EA) indicated that her parents frequently disagreed about her living arrangements. Her mother wanted her to spend more time with her. The disagreement between her parents had become part of her conflict with her mother. Charlotte explains that when her older brother took the initiative to live permanently with their father, she saw this as an opportunity to advocate for the same living arrangement. She said that she wanted to spend less time with her mother, partly because she found that they had a difficult relationship but also because she found living with her dad easier in her daily life. Charlotte explains why she initiated changes in her living arrangements:

*"[...] Yeah, or I think it is because mum and my brother quarreled a lot a while back. [...] And then he wanted to stay and live with our Dad, and then I wanted to live more with dad also, kind of. Because then it was kind of permitted. And then it was more fun to live here, but then we ended up spending less time there and then we came out of touch, I felt, and then it has become worse, kind of. [...] we argued a lot, or we disagreed a lot, because I wanted to be with dad and his family [...]"*

Some informants indicate that their problematic relationship with one parent also extends to a parent's family of origin. They feel that the parent and his/her family of origin share the same position, siding with the parent against them. Others find the notion of an alienated parent difficult and strive to create balance; they feel a responsibility for not spending equal time with each parent. They are sensitive to parents' finding alienated positioning hurtful and are careful in how they respond to why their preferred arrangement is spending most of their time with the other parent. When experiencing one of the parents saying negative things about the other parent, children take a stance to defend the parent that is criticized. Some children solve this situation

by reducing contact with the “troubling” parent. They feel that one parent is positioning them (forcing them) to align with the other parent. Linda (A) describes what she found challenging when she spent more time with her dad:

*It has been things like when mum and dad got a divorce, then dad said a lot of crap about mum to me. And a lot of things like that, and then I felt I had to protect mum again.*

I: “Right, right. And then you kind of felt caught in the middle then?”

Linda: “Yes, I kind of felt that I was forced to choose mum rather than dad. [...] And that really became an uncomfortable situation to be in. [...]”

Some children feel that one of their parents is unable to take responsibility for their own actions and feel that this capability is needed to re-establish a trustful relationship. Linda describes what she thinks of her needs in family counseling:

*“I don’t know, I do want to get a better relation to dad again. Because it feels bad not being there, feeling I cannot be there kind of. And I think that is bad.”*

Although Linda feels bad about *having to reduce contact* and having no other choice than being in a position of keeping distance (“*I cannot be there kind of*”), she hopes that this situation might change and that her relationship to her dad might improve. Linda (A) is uncertain of his ability to understand the effect of his own actions on the family:

*“[...] I only think we need to talk to each other, about what that is happened, but I don’t really think he understands how the things he have done affects us as family [...] [...] I told him I don’t think it’s ok [to say mean things about mother]. Then he tried to put the blame on ..., and kind of; yes, ... So I don’t feel he has taken the responsibility.”*

One part of her hopes that her father is able take responsibility, whereas the other part remembers his inability to change and why reducing contact has been necessary in taking care of herself.

Morten (A) explains how he decided to spend more time living at his father’s place and that a result was that his mother was angry with him. Thus, he had lost almost all contact with his younger sibling and his mother. He explained that he preferred to live with his father; when living with his mother, he felt that she was unable to discuss things with him. He felt that she was rigid. Morten explains:

*“[...] She is difficult to talk to sometimes. So it’s kind of difficult to discuss issues with her if she is opposed of something. It’s kind of, I am right and yeah. She only views things from her side. [...] So that is how it is, that is why I don’t have that much contact now, because there was a lot of ... kind of ... it was very unpredictable. So then it became very tiresome, sometimes it was OK, but many times there was a lot of fights [...].”*

#### 4.2.2. Aligning with a parent

When one parent criticizes the other, some children take a stand and defend the other parent, and they are aware that aligning with one parent means a *greater distance to the other*. Charlotte (EA) describes how aligning with her dad led her mother to feel that everybody is against her:

*“[...] I think dad decided well [as a parent]. And that yes, and if mother goes against dad then I protect and defend dad. I do understand both sides, but the... we have talked about it, then we have, then I have mostly agreed with dad. [...] And then it becomes a little bit like, that mum feels that everybody is against her. [...] But it is kind of wrong that we should choose a side, as well [...]”*

Charlotte describes how she finds it difficult to keep distance and that it feels wrong choosing a side and aligning with a parent.

#### 4.3. Keeping on with life

The dominant position of keeping on with life emerged from the storyline of life as more than family challenges. Subpositions of keeping on with life emerged as managing on my own, doing my daily routines and obtaining the necessary support. Managing on my own and doing my own routines were typical of adolescents and children with an active life; doing activities on their own and obtaining the necessary support were more typical of adolescents. The subposition will be presented and illustrated with interview excerpts.

Children experienced family challenges as disturbances in storylines of family conflict or storylines of the troubling parent. However, in parallel with these storylines, there were also accounts within storylines of life as more than family challenges. This latter storyline could be described as personal positioning, which run in parallel with role-oriented storylines of moral positioning e.g. about family challenges. Harré and Langenhove (1991, p. 397) state that; “*the more a person’s actions cannot be made intelligible by references to roles, the more prominent the personal positioning will be*”.

Informants described aspects of life of importance to them, like friends, school, and leisure time activities. In personal positioning, there were also accounts of how children were managing everyday life and of their ability to buffer disturbances from family challenges. They described how they were actively engaged in everyday life and that they were involved in something that was meaningful to them. This helped them to obtain distance to family challenges and closeness to living their life. A good example is Geir (A), when asked what he could do about family challenges, he said; *There is nothing I can do. I just need to carry on.*

##### 4.3.1. Managing it on my own

Ingrid (EA) is positioning herself as managing it on my own, with confidence in her ability to cope with family challenges. She states that she has no concerns about family life and that she has no need for counseling or additional support:

*“I don’t really have that much to talk about, in a way. I am great, and I don’t really need it, it’s not that much to talk about. There is nothing I want solved, that it is possible to solve 100%. So, it is not like I am walking around and think about it that I want to tell someone...”*

In saying “*There is nothing I want solved, that it is possible to solve 100%*”, Ingrid confirms the presence of unsolvable family challenges and that she expects them to continue and be part of family life. In the context of unresolved family challenges, Ingrid argues, *I am great*. In stating that she is great, she protests against being positioned as a victim in need of additional help and support. She advocates for a recognition of being able to manage it on her own. She is downplaying the effect of family challenges and arguing that, *it’s not that much to talk about*. By so doing, she calls for a third-order positioning, emphasizing that she positions herself in a storyline of life as more than family challenges.

Geir (A) described how it was important for him to be autonomous. He preferred not to involve parents or others in his inner thought and concerns about life. In reflecting about taking this position, he refers to his ability to function “outside” of family and his preference to handle life on his own. He explains that family members pressure him talk about himself and to conform to “the values of sharing your thought” in the household.

##### 4.3.2. Doing my regular routines

Some children emphasized that they prioritized to focus on everyday life and in doing routines that was of importance to them. They talked about how school work and friends and participating in sports or leisure time activities was of great importance to their wellbeing. While some informants focused on the disruptions from family challenges, others spoke of the stability and continuity that was present in life. Tore

(A) explains how the focus on regular routines had been helpful to him during his parent's separation. He had no recollections of thinking that his parent's separation would change his life. Tore describes that he is used to his father's absence due to his work commitments, meaning that life continued as *kind of normal* and that he could continue with his daily routines living at home. Talking about family conflict he describes how his parent's separation reduced his exposure to conflict. In explaining what he does when faced with his parents fighting, Tore explains:

*"I ... Usually I do something with my friends [...] So then I do it like this. If I am gaming with my friends, then I turn on "push and talk". [...] Then I am not able to hear them, and I can continue playing [...] Then it's kind of that I am not there, kind of. [...]"*

In using the words *"it's kind of that I am not there"*, he is referring to his ability to shut out disturbances of his parents' quarrelling and to keep contact with life outside of family, when playing online games with his friends.

#### 4.3.3. Obtaining the necessary support

Many children described how important it was to obtain the necessary support when needed. Some adolescents that struggled in relationships parent's found it helpful to obtain support from the other parent. In talking about conflict between parents, children often preferred talking to someone neutral. Some children had experience of talking to professionals, but few used their peers/friends as support. Although some children felt that talking about their concerns was helpful, many found it difficult to initiate conversations about family challenges. Ellinor (A) reports that she usually did not talk about her challenges, and that her mother was an exception. Ellinor (A), explains that it is important for her that the adult take the initiative, otherwise she does not talk about her concerns.

*Ellinor says: "I talked a little with my mother, but nobody else really"*  
*I: "no, no, right"*  
*Ellinor: "So mummy knows about these things and I have talked to her about it also"*  
*I: "yes, so it's not something you have talked to friends about or anything like that?"*  
*Ellinor: "No, not really"*  
*I: "Why is that, I am just curious? Why do you think?"*  
*Ellinor: "I am kind of a closed person, if things is not mentioned... I don't really have any difficulties talking about it. But not if it not somehow put it on the agenda, then I don't initiate to discuss it."*

Morten (A) described how his dad gave him support when he was struggling in his relationship with his mother. He appreciate that his father who initiates talking to him, and that his father is present when he needs him, ready to give him advice. Morten says, *Yes, I do think about it on my own, and then I talk to my dad because we have a very good relationship, right [...] about what he thinks I should do, and then we discuss it. [...] We did talk a lot about things before, for a long time really. But now I am kind of empty. We did talk a lot about it before.*

Mona (EA) talks of obtaining support in handling her father. She thinks it is OK to talk about challenges in the family, but she is unsure whether it is helpful. She talks to friends and her mother about her difficult relationship with her father. Mona says,

*"[...] I have talked a little with friends. About dad, that he is very difficult. [...] But I haven't talked a lot. [...] And then I have talked to mum about it. [...] And then I talked to a psychotherapist. [...] I do like to talk about it, but I don't know if it helps. [...]"*

Hilde (EA) found it helpful to talk to other people than her mother and father about family challenges. At first, she found it difficult to talk, but now she recommends others to talk to someone neutral. She says; *Talk about it, and often with someone that is not your mum or dad.*

## 5. Discussion

In this section, we discuss the implications of three dominant subject positions; keeping balance, keeping distance, keeping on with life. Moreover, how these positions are connected to notions of moral obligations of self and expectations from self and others. Furthermore, we address how prolonged conflict is oppressive to the family system, and we argue that children take positions of healthy resistance to address family challenges. Finally, we describe limitations in our study and provide suggestions to professionals working with children and their families in prolonged conflict.

### 5.1. Dominant subject positions of children

Child positions emerged as autobiographical positions in family talk as linguistic distinctions between who children positioned as speaker (first person) and who was positioned as others (third person) as participants in the story. Furthermore, child positions also emerged as subject positions.

In subject position of keeping balance children primarily positioned themselves as first person (I), often referring to their parents or their relationship (dyad) and family households in the third person. In subject position of keeping distance, first person was often we/us, referring to the child and one parent as the *speaker* talking about their opinions about the other parent. This indicates that children formed alliances and had support from one of their parents. Talk about the troubling parent often involved indirect positioning (Harrè & Moghaddam, 2004, p. 6), with use of unfavorable characterological traits to position the other parent as a troubling/dysfunctional parent, e.g., *"she unable to understand"*. In subject position of keeping on with life children talked in the first person but often involved many participants (friends, family, and professionals) from multiple contexts in life.

#### 5.1.1. Keeping balance

Children's reflective talk about family life revealed a sensitivity to the quality of their parents' relationship and revealed how they perceive their parents' positioning themselves toward each other, e.g., whether parents talk as though they are friends or show signs of anger or hostility. Child sensitivity to the quality of the parental dyad is consistent with other research (P. T. Davies et al., 2015; P. T. Davies et al., 2016; Ness et al., 2014).

Children in two households talked of hearing one parent speak ill of the other and of being wary of what information they could reveal from one household to the other. The divided loyalties this situation produces may have adverse social and psychological consequences for some children, whereas others find means of keeping balance (Affi & McManus, 2010; Dallos, Lakus, Cahart, & McKenzie, 2016). Inherent in the position of keeping balance is an understanding of coparental conflict as a potential threat to the stability of the family and their own wellbeing. Furthermore, the position of keeping balance holds and resonates with several perspectives; first, it emphasizes that coparental conflict is a family conflict involving children and not a dyadic enclosed phenomenon of parents.

Second, it suggests that a child is attentive to his or her triangular position in the family, to the need for a balanced position to stay out of conflict and to the need not to jeopardize the relationship with either parent or the relationship between them. This point embraces a systemic theory premise that says that when any two people interact, their interactions are influenced by their respective relationships with the same third person (Bateson, 2000). Thus, a child's attachment representations are shaped not only by the relationship with each parent but also by the relationship between them (Dallos & Vetere, 2012).

Feeling caught between their parents' conflict and polarized interest can give children two options: keeping a balanced and "neutral" position or to take a position closer to one of the parents and consequently facing the risk of moving further away from the other. We argue that



taking the position of keeping balance in the family could be viewed as an act of resistance to relational threats from family conflict. This resembles the three options Watts (2008) describes children can take in ongoing parental conflicts, a) stand their ground and “tell-it-like-it is” b) duck beneath the conflict-“tell either parent what they want to hear”, C) quietly turn inwards- “shut down, and try to be invisible”(Smyth & Moloney, 2019).

Although keeping a balanced position is difficult, we argue that doing so in many cases would be a preferred choice for children in situations in which they have strong connections with both parents or when the parents represent secure attachment figures (Bowlby, 1969). However, safe and secure attachment could also make a situation less threatening for a child, e.g., to change living arrangements and to spend more time with one parent than with the other. Children can have greater affinity with one parent than the other; they can prefer to live with one parent without having a dislike for the other. In other cases, there is an alignment of a child with one parent due to minimal parent involvement prior to separation or poor parenting (Sheehan, 2018)

From a positioning theory perspective, speech acts and subject positions are part of a moral domain; thus, children navigate and position themselves within discourses of what children and parents “ought to do” (Harré, 2016). These “oughts” can reflect how children might blame themselves when parents argue about matters involving themselves. Parents are often unable to take the position of “responsibility for the conflict”; thus, the child takes this position because the destabilizing conflict suggests that someone in the family system “ought to be responsible”. Positions should be interpreted as part of the discourses of family life. Harré (2016, p. 542) states that social action consists of (...) attempts to conform to norms or sometimes to resist them.

### 5.1.2. Keeping distance

When children perceive parents’ behavior or their relationship as problematic, children often take the dominant position keeping distance. The child can feel that the contact with a parent is distressing but at the same time find it difficult to reject the troubling parent. In some instances, adolescent informants reported that oppressive parent behavior such as negative disclosures, bitterness and resentment about the other parent made reduced contact (moving out) necessary to protect themselves. This point resonates with other studies that report that potentially alienating parenting or denigrating one’s coparent appears to boomerang and hurt the parent’s own relationship with the children rather than distance children from the co-parent (Rowen & Emery, 2018). Adolescents took up a position that enabled them to reject their oppressive parent, while their younger siblings were not in the same position to do so. Adolescents’ stories indicate that their younger siblings also were exposed to bitterness and resentment from one of their parents about the other. Although, it could also be that adolescents “feelings of being caught” (Afifi & McManus, 2010) was different than those of their younger sibling. Adolescents might feel the pressure to voice their opinion, whereas those younger was less inclined to feel these expectations. Clearly, to early adolescents certain positions of keeping distance was not readily available. Their choices of resistance, were often to align with their oppressive parent or to keep a balanced position between their parents eg. a silenced position.

The rejected parent might blame the other parent for the youth’s rejection, thus possibly intensifying the conflict. Adolescents might perceive this social response from the rejected parent as hurtful and/or as not taking their concerns seriously, which could cause further distance. Youths can also form cross-generational coalitions that in some cases can result in parental alienation, with one parent against the other (Sheehan, 2018). However, postseparated family life can give children a new opportunity to reflect on the quality of family relationships. Children are on their own with each parent, which can also lead to a questioning and challenging of their relationship with their parent (Berman, 2015).

### 5.1.3. Keeping on with life

As a response to family challenges, this change of focus could be viewed as an adaptive resistance strategy applicable to adolescents. While younger children often is dependent on their parents to pursuit activities outside home, adolescents are often more independent in “stepping out” of family life. However, early adolescents that were involved in many leisure activities seemed also to take up this position. Thus, children that is not active in leisure activities, could take up this position when they focus on regular routines as school work and in seeking support from the other parent. Adolescents reported that they often obtained support from one of their parents if they had challenges in life.

This position can promote positive social response from parents because it can be viewed as a normal early/adolescent position of aligning more with life with friends than with family. To focus on friends and avoid family conflict exposure also resonates as a protective factor and positive coping behavior (Miller et al., 2017a; O’Hara, 2018). Taking a position “outside” of family could also involve negative social responses because parents could feel rejected, possibly increasing relational tension between child and parent. Such a choice could also increase conflict between parents with respect to how to understand this autonomous position. When their youth stay out of sight can also entail difficulties for parents in detecting challenges and a need of support. Adolescents in this position might long for more connectedness with their parents and family but feel that they have no choice other than to step outside of family.

### 5.2. Moral obligations and expectations of children in prolonged family conflict

In storylines connected to family challenges, children positioned themselves as agents with moral obligations to stay connected to family relationships. Moreover, with inherent expectations of parents as responsive providers of wellbeing, stability and security. In personal storylines of life as more than family challenges, adolescents felt a moral obligation of self-agency in providing wellbeing inside and outside of family life. The various storylines embrace notions of family as providing connectedness and security and that children are both (1) dependent upon family resources and (2) responsible social actors (Hollekim, Anderssen, & Daniel, 2016; Mayall, 2002) who navigate family challenges and stay connected and supported. Emerging discourses of the child as a responsible agent further reflect what Kaganas and Diduck (2004, p. 959) suggest, that is, that “the ‘good’ child of separation or divorce is responsible for safeguarding his or her own welfare. [...]” The storylines of family challenges reflect that children take part in a blending of paradigms in which the children are dependable, in need of family connectedness and are autonomous agent/social actors in many arenas of life. In the traditional paradigm, children of separation are the vulnerable child and the passive victim of his or her parents’ choices. However, in the modern paradigm, the separated child bears the responsibility for promoting his or her own welfare by helping to build the ‘good’ postseparation family in which he or she will be safe (Kaganas & Diduck, 2004). However, child agency is not an autonomous process (Berman, 2018) but rather a process that demonstrates the systemic premise of family interdependence, or as Neale and Flowerdew (2007) suggest, it is something that always occurs in a relational context, e.g., as part of ongoing coconstruction of family relationships.

### 5.3. Child positions as resistance to family challenges

Family conflict is a threat to children’s sense of safety and security in child-parent relationships and the family system (Cummings, Koss, & Davies, 2015; P. T. Davies, Cummings, & Winter, 2004). Our analyses show that children took different position to challenges in the family. Early adolescents and those older typically took up different positions,

this might indicate that the positioning from family conflict as threats varies with age. Another possibility is that perceptions of challenges and of available positions to take up is somewhat different between age groups. In general adolescents are expected to be more independent, and in being closer to adulthood they are also more mature to make decisions on their own.

We argue that each dominant position represents an act of resistance to challenges related to family conflict, to their dignity and to being a child in family. Adolescent has typically more capabilities and possibilities to take up certain positions to challenges of family conflict than those younger. This may also enhance their capabilities of resistance.

Resistance such as moving out or reducing contact with a parent often elicited negative responses from “the troubling parent” and recognition and approval from the other parent. Moreover, adolescents often received positive social responses from one of their parents. One of their parents was often understanding when an adolescent had experienced oppressive acts from the other parent. Further parents often recognized that moving out from the other parents was necessary to promote their own wellbeing.

The concept of healthy resistance resembles Antonovsky and Sourani (1988) concept of “generalized resistance resources” in promoting joint recognition of difficulties and of contingency in pursuit of wellbeing. This concept also resonates with the view in positioning theory that people have a (...) *tendency to retreat from harmful situations and move towards those more favorable to our survival* (Harré, 2016, p. 543). Children can take the position of keeping balance to promote stability and connectedness when facing family conflict, or they can just try to keep on with life. Resisting and repositioning themselves might not be sufficient to promote or to harbor sustainable wellbeing. As mentioned earlier well-being, even resilience, may harbor both strengths as competences in overcoming challenges, but also costs as traumas or relational strains of distrust. Children can, however, become recognized for efforts in keeping balance or to stay connected to family, adding positive social responses of self-worth that are health promoting.

#### 5.4. Limitations

There were several limitations to the study that merit discussion, qualitative methodology may give insights of phenomenon’s, but it is not suitable to generalize findings. Clearly, the sample of children is sufficient but small, a larger sample could give further indications e.g. if child positions in family conflict vary across genders or in younger children. Although many considerations were made to ensure that child informants felt safety in the interview e.g. relational permission from their parents. Early adolescents may still feel a loyalty conflicts that hindered them to disclose descriptions of family life. First author, being as clinician and interviewer, may give important insights but it could also give preconceptions that limited the scope in in research.

#### 5.5. Conclusion and implication for practice

The findings of the dominant positions of keeping balance, keeping distance and keeping on with life calls for more awareness of child positions and the positioning of children in prolonged family conflict. Our study indicates that adolescents have more capabilities of certain positions than early adolescents. Early adolescents are often on their own in keeping balance in their family, they are loyal and join family silence about challenges. Adolescents more often feel the burden of in being positioned as the one responsible. Adolescents often take up a position of keeping distance while managing their relationship to a “troubling” parent. Parallel to this children take up a position of keeping on with life and thus resist the challenges in the family. Additional research is needed on how parents view the positioning of children, themselves as parents and as adults in situations of prolonged family

conflict.

Family therapist and other professionals often refer to separated families in prolonged conflict as ‘high conflict’ families. The concept of ‘high conflict’ family has been criticized for its ambiguity (Friedman, 2004). More importantly, it is a construction that derives from adult perspectives among professionals striving to help parents who find coparenting exceedingly difficult. Parents often advocate on behalf of their child, and their polarized assumptions on how the child is positioned in the family, are often part of the conflict cycle itself (Jevne & Andenaes, 2017). We warn professionals against an “adult-biased” view of the dyadic family conflict and of fixation on the conflict level, e.g., of a “measurement gaze” on levels of conflict, consequently risking distorting children’s positions, perspectives and experience in these families (James, Marples, Rantalaiho, & Haugen, 2010).

We urge professionals to assist families to reduce child exposure to hostility and unresolved conflicts. However, endless attempts to solve prolonged coparental conflicts, with “more of the same” interventions (Watzlawick et al., 1967) could embed the conflict further. System theory emphasize that change could be promoted in the family, from changes in any of the family relations. Our study shows that child “exposure” to post divorcé conflict, is located to a large degree in each household and in their contact with the individual parent. The use of positioning theory might help professionals to take a within-perspective from the child position. Consequently, in prolonged conflict families, more efforts should be made to help each parent to buffer risk and promote resilience in their child e.g. in resilience oriented services like “Strong children in 2 homes”.

Separated families in prolonged conflict need services that involve children and recognize children’s positions of resistance to family conflict. Children need professionals that is able to deconstruct conflict as behaviors and point to oppressive parenting behaviors (e.g. unfair disparagement of one parent by another) as the responsibility of individual parents. Moreover, children need professionals that validate child responses as resistance to oppressive parenting behaviors and to family conflict. Social responses from authorities such as professionals in child and family services could promote healthy resistance and enhance child’s wellbeing and feelings of dignity. Further, professional need to see the child as part of a complex family system that imbedded in conflict. This calls for systemic knowledge and methods to intervene on both family level (Lorås, 2018; Lorås, Bertrando, & Ness, 2017) and on individual level (Mæhle, 2003). We suggest that family therapist and other professionals take a position as “a stabilizing third” to promote safety in the family, to give children and parents aid in dealing with relational difficulties within each household system. Moreover, parents need aid in being responsive to child concerns and in taking steps to strengthen child-parent relationships.

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