

## ARTICLE

# A Trauma-Informed Approach to Arresting Migrant Families for Deportation

## New Policing Practice\*

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### Abstract

*An arrest can be a potentially traumatic event for parents and children. In Norway, the National Police Immigration Service (NPIS) has introduced four child-specific principles – safety, understanding, predictability and involvement – to guide a new practice to prevent traumatic stress. We explored how the police understand and practise the new approach when arresting families to be deported. We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with police officers who arrest migrant families. We analysed the levels of understanding, from descriptive to practical and reflective understanding. Analysing the levels of understanding makes it possible to decide where and how to improve the practice and the delivery of instruction. We found that police officers who demonstrate a reflective understanding are capable of reflecting on their own actions and use the principles to reduce stress, thereby operationalizing their “know-how” in practice. We suggest creating institutional activities that promote reflection-on-action to develop the collective institutionalization of the new practice, meeting the pressing challenges of contemporary policing.*

**Keywords:** traumatic stress, reflective practice, police work, institutionalizing, deportation of children.

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## 1 Introduction

In 2016, the Norwegian Storting/Parliament allocated funds to strengthen child-specific competence in the asylum chain. The National Police Immigration Service (NPIS) allocated some of its funds to strengthen its practice, with a focus on preventing or reducing the harmful effects on families with children when returning to their country of origin. To reduce the harm experienced by children, including traumatic stress, from their contact with the police, it was necessary to update the method of arresting families with children. In 2017, the NPIS in Norway initiated a project to improve its practices to safeguard children's needs (NPIS, 2018) when the NPIS interacts with unaccompanied minors and families with children. A trauma-informed police approach was defined, aiming to reduce traumatic stress and prevent re-traumatization and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). A central element of defining the trauma-informed approach in the NPIS was to set out child-specific principles that are context-specific and relevant during an arrest. Those principles are empirically supported by research widely used to inform intervention and prevention efforts (Hobfoll et al., 2007). The child-specific principles guide the police in preventing harm to minors through four key considerations: safety, understanding, predictability and involvement. The NPIS strives to implement these principles in daily practice for everyone working on the deportation of families with children. The implementation process (2017-2021) consisted of a variety of activities, such as practical training, lectures, case discussions, mentoring, online courses and the development of written guidelines for asylum cases involving children. We interviewed 20 NPIS officers to explore how the police officers understand and practice the four child-specific principles when arresting families to be deported. The objective was to explore how the principles have been adopted in practice and how police officers understand the change from historical methods of deportation to the new approach.

## 2 Background

Each year, many irregular migrant third-country nationals leave the European Union to return to their country of origin. Various programmes facilitate this process, such as assisted voluntary return programmes (European Migration Network, 2019). However, despite the aim of voluntary return, forced removals are frequently needed. In 2019, 4,157 people were forcefully deported from Norway. Of these, 161 were children (aged below 18; NPIS, 2021). When a family without legal residence does not voluntarily leave Norway, the NPIS – a national special unit that assists the main police force with immigration cases – is responsible for arranging their deportation.

Traditionally, when deporting a family, the police followed a procedure whereby they would enter the family's residence and take them by surprise, thus gaining control of the situation. In upholding children's rights, the police were depended on to balance humanitarian concerns and criminal law requirements; they did so in a manner that varied from case to case based on contextual and organizational

factors (Edvardsen & Hoel, 2021). The deportation relied largely on individual police officers' ways of handling the situation and carrying out their task (van Dijk et al., 2016), with officers using different coping strategies in similar situations (Hansson et al., 2017). Police officers' individual ideals were largely the basis for their actions.

The practice of arresting, detaining and deporting families with children was, under certain circumstances, potentially traumatic for both the children and the parents (NPIS, 2018, p. 16), especially when coercive measures were used. An event is considered "potentially traumatic" when the exposure includes a direct or indirect experience of actual or threatened death or serious injury. PTSD potentially results from traumatic exposure (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), and re-traumatization can occur when a previously traumatized person is exposed to adversity that can awaken the same types of feelings as the earlier trauma. Norris et al. (2002) showed that children and youth are vulnerable to traumatic stress. Schoolchildren's cognitive abilities and lack of life experience can reduce their ability to, for example, handle acute helplessness or comprehend and make sense of the world and could result in a loss of perceived safety and social support (Brewin et al., 2000).

To prevent traumatic stress from becoming a chronic disorder, the concept of *trauma-informed approaches* has spread in recent decades, attracting interest from practitioners and scholars in various fields, including criminal justice (Champine et al., 2019; Maynard et al., 2019; SAMHSA, 2014). According to the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA, 2014),

A program, organization or system that is trauma-informed realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families and staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization (p. 9).

The Norwegian project was inspired by the concept of a trauma-informed approach and guidance to develop such an approach, as recommended by SAMHSA (2014). The children and families with which the NPIS interacts could be vulnerable owing to a history of trauma. Trang and Lau (2002) and Thompson et al. (2016) summarized international research on this subject, and Vervliet et al. (2014), Jakobsen et al. (2014), and Skårdalmo and Jensen (2015) described refugees and asylum seekers in Norway and their prior exposure to traumatic events.

A national mission statement was formulated for the NPIS, establishing that all policing practices concerning asylum cases involving children should be "safe, secure and responsible", without causing harm. Furthermore, a staff handbook was released that provided general knowledge on the nature of traumatic stress, as well as several manuals outlining context- and process-specific procedures (NPIS, 2018). Table 1 lists the key principles, general actions to fulfil those principles and the overall goals of the principles, as defined by the NPIS. These principles formed the basis for a new collective working method.

**Table 1** *Child-specific principles, actions and goals (NPIS, 2018)*

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Goal – child</b>	<b>Goal – process</b>
Safety	Remain calm and friendly during interactions with children	Achieve a sense of safety	Do no harm: – Eliminate harmful stress – Collaborate and dialogue with the family
Understanding	Explain what is happening and why	Understand the present situation	– Engage parents in supporting the children
Predictability	Explain what will happen next and how	Understand the next steps	– Administer as little force as possible
Involvement	Communicate directly and provide opportunities for children to influence their situation	Achieve a sense of control	

There is a lack of research on police work to deport children. Previous studies reported that deviant police behaviour and officers' negative emotions related to stress can impact how they treat vulnerable populations (Hansson, 2017). A Swedish study exploring the nation's repatriation of asylum-seeking children reported low collaboration among the professionals involved (Sundqvist et al., 2016). Hansson (2017) investigated Swedish police officers' mental health in the context of deportations of unaccompanied, asylum-seeking refugee children and found that the police officers seemed to utilize both emotional and problem-solving coping during the deportation process. Officers may hold varying perceptions of what constitutes efficient and dignified repatriation (Hansson et al., 2015) and thus apply different coping strategies in similar situations (Hansson et al., 2017). In that setting, this work contributes to the literature by documenting a new policing practice for planning families' deportation and arresting those families, as well as adding knowledge about the key principles that should guide such efforts and how the police reflect on changes to their working practice.

### 3 Theoretical Framework

Our analytical work is inspired by Bloom's revised taxonomy using a table to classify content and actions and to examine alignment with the child-specific principles and thereby the educational opportunities (Krathwohl, 2002). Based on this examination, it is possible to decide where and how to improve curriculum planning and the delivery of instruction (Krathwohl, 2002). We use the taxonomy to categorize the cognitive process of the officers' understanding. The three cognitive stages, or levels, can be revealed from the interview content as (1) descriptive, (2) practical and (3) reflective understanding. Descriptive and practical understanding is represented by conceptual and procedural knowledge, whereas reflective understanding is interwoven with metacognitive knowledge (Krathwohl, 2002).

*Conceptual knowledge* is the knowledge of basic elements within a larger structure that enables the elements to function together. Descriptive understanding constitutes this basic level, where the officer demonstrates a general understanding of the key child-specific principles, as well as the factors causing and preventing traumatic stress, re-traumatization, and PTSD. *Procedural knowledge* is the understanding of how to use the principles. Practical understanding involves an officer performing explicit actions when interacting with a child, such as crouching down to talk to them in a friendly manner. An officer may present a variety of child-friendly activities that are used during such an assignment but without offering further reflections. Reflective understanding is connected to *metacognitive knowledge*, the understanding of how to use the principles and an awareness of one's own cognition (i.e. self-knowledge about opportunities to learn and to expand practice). Reflective understanding is demonstrated by an officer's descriptions of explicit actions that justify their plans and actions regarding the child. Officers may provide thoughts and reflections on how to adapt their practice and why. Hence, there is an emotional aspect to the officer's work when assessing the child's reactions. The reflective police officer has metacognitive knowledge, analyses each facet of the situation and determines how the parts relate to one another to take in the overall picture of the arrest. Reflective understanding empowers police officers to compare different actions they are considering and to criticize or question their actions in practice.

Each level appears to build on the previous one. Hence, before police officers can practically apply strategies when interacting with a child, they need a descriptive understanding of the purpose of their interaction and the reason for providing the child with information. Then, to analyse the key child-specific principles and reflectively consider which strategy to use to convey information to the child, police officers must become aware of the child's emotions and assess their reactions (i.e. through their practical understanding). It is only when they know which strategy to use to apply the key principles, and how, that they can then develop reflective understanding, which supports them in reviewing how the principles were upheld.

The process of making an arrest has unforeseen elements, and the reactions of adults and children are unpredictable. As such, an arrest depends heavily on individual police officers' spontaneous personal judgments, risk assessment, and performance of arrest procedures. Spontaneous action can be described as applying know-how or knowing-in-action (Schön, 1983); if an officer thinks about this action, it is called reflecting-in-action. A practice-based approach connects "knowing" with "doing" (Gherardi, 2000); that is, the individual police officer's knowledge is considered to be situated in policing practice. After an action has been carried out, we use Schön's (1983) term "reflective practice" to then describe the process by which professionals become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experience. Schön's (1983) concept refers to reflection-*on*-action in describing how reflecting on the likely consequences of an action is a social matter.

Organizational learning is the transfer of knowledge between the individual and the organization. If individuals' learning outcomes are to be spread

organization-wide, then reflective practice must become embedded in the organizational culture, valued and promulgated by the organization and made part of how officers understand that they can contribute to the development of their work and improvement of policing (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Argyris and Schön (1978) referred to two levels of organizational learning: single-loop and double-loop learning. Single-loop learning means responding to changes in the environment without changing the core set of organizational norms and assumptions. Double-loop learning is about correcting or changing the underlying causes of a problematic action. “Double-loop learning occurs when an error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization’s underlying norms, policies and objectives” (Argyris & Schön, 1978, pp. 2-3). When police officers develop reflective understanding through single-loop learning, they modify their actions according to the difference they have noted between the intended and actual outcomes, thereby making small adjustments to their practices and behaviours while still founding them on the child-specific principles.

Schön (1987) defined technical rationality as holding that “practitioners are instrumental problem solvers, who select technical means best suited to particular purposes. Rigorous professional practitioners solve well-formed instrumental problems by applying theory and technique derived from systematic preferably scientific knowledge” (pp. 3-4). Schön (1983) distinguished between reflecting-*in*-action and reflecting-*on*-action. For police officers, reflecting-*in*-action is the capacity to react apparently intuitively – and generally in a time-critical way – to a set of ambiguous and unpredictable circumstances that require solutions. Reflecting-*in*-action allows police officers to make sense of the context in which they operate and to be flexible, providing individual responses to complex situations.

#### 4 Method

For this qualitative study, we interviewed police officers planning for and performing the arrest of immigrant families with children. Empirical data was collected using a qualitative case study research method (Yin, 2003) that explored the adoption of a new policing practice for arresting families with children. The case study approach enabled us to conduct in-depth research and develop concepts for how to interpret police work involving the four child-specific principles. We carried out fieldwork between February and October 2020.

In Norway, police work involving arrests of children and their families is organized primarily by one department within the police immigration unit. All police officers in this unit were interviewed, along with central police officers from another department involved in planning and performing arrests of families with children. In total, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews in the workplace or by telephone, depending on the participants’ travel opportunities at the time of the interviews. The semi-structured interviews had predefined themes and subjects (Kvale, 1997). The informants were asked to describe (1) their planning and preparation to arrest families with children, (2) their work at these families’



residences, (3) their work after finishing the assignment and (4) the collaboration between those involved. The informants were also asked about (5) their experiences with assignments involving children's arrest before the new practice was implemented, (6) their engagement with implementing the key principles and (7) practical examples of assignments involving the principles where they reduced the harm to children. When appropriate, the themes introduced in the interviews were followed up with questions.

The empirical material was coded according to the interview content and categorized according to the police officers' understanding and application of the four child-specific principles. The results reflect the patterns that emerged from the findings (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 2009) concerning the police work and practice underpinned by the four principles when arresting families to be deported. To analyse police officers' reflection on their practical knowledge, we examined the four principles in depth.

To illustrate how Norwegian police officers go about deporting families with children today, we selected quotes from the interviews that give rich descriptions of the work and demonstrate officers' reflective understanding of children's reactions. We refrain from analytic overcounting, that is "emphasizing the number of respondents falling into a category instead of the qualitative nature of the categories themselves" (Sandelowski, 2001, p. 238). As such, we do not include as many quotes as possible but instead present informants and quotations that convey officers' in-depth understanding of the new approach.

All the informants are experienced in the field, with between 5 and 10 years of practice, which enabled us to capture rich, descriptive data. The interviews, which lasted 50 to 90 minutes, were recorded, transcribed verbatim, thoroughly read and coded based on the themes and content. We then discussed the findings and later ran through these with the police officers to check their reliability (Kvale, 1997). The Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the design of the study, including the way the data was collected, handled, analysed, used and stored. The study's design was further approved by the NPIS and the National Police Directorate.

## 5 Results

The results of this article are structured according to the police officers' description of their practice (i.e. knowledge expressed), as well as according to the four child-specific principles – safety, understanding, predictability and involvement – and how the police officers talked about their perceptions of their practice. We interpreted how the officers referred to the child-specific principles as illustrating a linear development of levels of understanding, from a descriptive understanding of the principles to practical and then reflective understanding, which affects police officers' practice when arresting families to be deported. Each level concerns emotions and actions that arise when assessing children's reactions using the child-specific principles. Elaborations of the levels were developed from the informants' descriptions of their planning processes and their interactions with

children (Table 2). We used this analytical framework to determine how the police officers understood and operationalized the principles in practice.

**Table 2** *Linear use of child-specific principles*

<b>Linear direction of use of child-specific principles</b>			
	<b>Descriptive understanding – determining the meaning</b>	<b>Practical understanding – applying the principles</b>	<b>Reflective understanding – analysing the principles</b>
Content	Organization and preparation Actions do not address the child directly	Explicit actions when interacting with the child	Justifying plans and explicit actions when interacting with the child
Action	Allocating resources Providing information	Talking to the child Crouching down	Taking responsibility for the child Remaining aware of the child's emotions Assessing the child's reactions
Utterance	Remember a child seat in the car. Make sure they get enough food, feel safe and have enough information ... They ask questions, and most people can usually respond to these. The most important thing is to read up on the case in advance. (Informant 18) Information provides security. If we receive information on the situation as it changes, we provide that information to the child. (Informant 5)	If you sit down and talk to them, they may not understand. If you sit down on the floor and play a bit, then they may understand. (Informant 17) Take care of them, entertain them a little and make sure they have eaten and are fine. (Informant 18)	Security is important. Not to increase the child's stress in the situation ... the time aspect [is important; it is key] that you have enough time. It is time that lowers the stress for us, and hopefully, for those we are going to apprehend. Insecurity creates stress, and you get stressed by not knowing how to deal with children who scream, are frightened or are quiet, which is often the norm. (Informant 16)

In this setting, the level of reflective understanding represents individual police officers' degree of successful operationalization of the four principles in practice. These police officers know how to apply the child-specific principles and analyse their use. In practice, they successfully used the principles in their work to arrest families, and their descriptions of such cases contribute to knowledge that will inform the development of the new policing practice.

A reflective understanding of practice empowers professionals to become aware of their implicit knowledge base and learn from their experience (Schön, 1983); certain excerpts from the interviews illustrate how police officers justify



their work as having upheld the principles. We propose that there is the opportunity for such exemplary actions to become embedded in organizational practices (Argyris & Schön, 1996), befitting the aim of the NPIS to support these four child-specific principles by implementing an updated approach to practice.

### *5.1 Reflective Understanding of the Child-Specific Principles*

Norwegian officers' reflective understanding of the four child-specific principles, as presented here, points to their awareness of the new practice, in general, and their awareness of their own cognition and metacognitive knowledge specifically (Krathwohl, 2002). Thus, they have contextual and conditional knowledge of the practice that should lead such an arrest.

#### *5.1.1 Safety*

The new guidelines describe the actions that should be taken to uphold the principle of safety, such as remaining calm and friendly when interacting with children and helping children feel safe. Before the child-specific principles were introduced, police officers often deemed an arrest successful based on quietness or silence, which was said to indicate that the situation was not frightening or stressful for the children. Two informants explained their previous practice as follows:

When I ask my colleagues, "How did it [the deportation] go?" sometimes, my colleagues say, "Yes, fine! The children were quiet and calm, and it was great." It does not really tell me anything today [after working with the principles] about how those kids were doing, although they were quiet and appeared calm. (Informant 3)

If the child is quiet and does not cry ..., then those who have completed the assignment think it went very well. Yet, we do not know what has occurred in the child's mind. After all, trauma can build up without them screaming or crying. (Informant 2)

Previously, our informants focused on the physical reactions of the children without reflecting on or probing their well-being in conversation with them. In the new trauma-informed practice, safety is ensured by connecting with the children through attention paid to their body language and officers' way of talking, with efforts made by officers to relate to the children – all elements that emphasize the children's psychological reactions. Ensuring the children's safety depends on the relationship between the police officers and the children, which is developed through body language (i.e. sitting down to be at the same level as a child), playing together and talking in a friendly manner:

Sit down at the same height and explain very briefly, using short sentences, what is going to happen ... in a calm way. (Informant 1)

It is important to be calm and appear safe. Sometimes, you have to use force, but you should not escalate the situation. You must acknowledge that the children are there, so they know that you see them ... I often find that

children quickly gain trust in you when you remain calm and show and explain that you are not doing anything dangerous. (Informant 14)

To keep the situation calm, the police must allocate sufficient time for the arrest and the following deportation, as well as sufficient resources to support the children. Accordingly, the police now assign one officer to be responsible for each child and build a relationship with them:

The children get their own designated police officer who focuses on a single child ... and establishes contact. If you do not get an answer verbally, you start building a relationship with the child by making eye contact or playing if the child wants to. (Informant 16)

In the new practice, the police determine the child's safety either by receiving verbal confirmation from the child that they feel secure or by connecting with the child via eye contact or joining in activities with them. Interaction with the child helps to minimize the stress created by the situation. One police officer described the "stress window" or "window of tolerance". To stay within the window, sufficient time is needed to connect with the child and establish their safety:

It can be very harmful for the children to get outside this stress window. If we can keep them within that stress window, it means that they do not have trauma later on. Even if an arrest has gone smoothly, I have thought, "This [situation] could make things difficult for them later on". If we can hold them within that [stress window], then we may not unsettle them going forward. (Informant 14)

In contrast to the previous practice, the new practice is focused on the aftereffects of the arrest and can be adjusted according to the child's age, with police officers being flexible in their interactions with a child based on the available information and their assessment of the child's mental age:

To communicate with a 10-year-old child is a completely different task compared to a three-year-old. With a three-year-old ... , maybe you communicate through play or body language. With an older child, you can explain things in a completely different way. (Informant 12)

Try to play with them, and make sure they are well. The family ... often has enough to think about. So, it is about playing and talking to them – "becoming friends." There is a lot you can do; it all depends on the child and what they think is fun. The younger they are, the more you can ... joke a little and make funny faces. There are a lot of things to laugh about with a three-year-old so they believe we are decent people. (Informant 8)

Alongside acting with kindness and friendliness, police officers must handle the situation humanely and with empathy:

Sadly, you are now to be sent out of Norway, but it is not because of us [the specific police officers in the residence]. We can smile; we can have a decent dialogue; we can represent something safe and humane. [As an officer, you should] listen and take your time. Focus on ... the fellow human or the interpersonal side of things. These relationships factor into a successful outcome. (Informant 13)

A reflective understanding of the safety principle is associated with looking beyond a child's silence to seek out signs of psychological processes that might lead to late reactions or trauma. The police officers have self-knowledge, that is, reflecting on their body language, way of talking and connections made with children, both verbally and nonverbally. They allocate resources to each child and plan sufficient time for the arrest, thus enabling them to develop relationships with the children involved. In sum, they minimize the stress created by the situation for both themselves and the children.

### 5.1.2 *Understanding*

The principle of understanding relates to police work to help children and their parents better understand their situation by explaining to them what is happening and why, with clear and appropriate information. Before the child-specific principles were introduced, the focus was on explaining the situation to the parents, without an explicit focus on the children:

Previously, we focused on explaining to the parents what was going to happen, but we never informed the children. I do not think it [informing the children] was on our mind. (Informant 1)

A reflective understanding of the child-specific principle of understanding allows police officers to explain the situation in a way that ensures the children understand what is happening, while also being sensitive to how well a child is comprehending the situation. One informant explained the questions he asks himself in this context:

Have I explained what is happening right here and now, and what the next step will be? Have they really understood why we are there and what we are going to do? (Informant 1)

Police officers with a reflective understanding aim to normalize the situation by explaining to the family and the children that their reactions are normal. Detailed explanations of what is going to happen are intended to build an understanding of the situation and prevent misunderstandings:

"It is normal if you are scared and react, or get upset, but I must explain [what is happening] in a detailed way so that there will not be any ... misunderstandings." I try not to leave a gap in their understanding where they use their own imagination to create their own realities. You need to explain

everything very clearly, and nothing is a taboo topic for them to discuss with us. (Informant 13)

Giving appropriate information helps to prevent a “gap” in their understanding or a misinterpretation of the situation. The new practice focuses on the family as a unit, with information provided so all family members can understand. As much as possible, policing practice aims to keep the family together and speak to the children in an age-appropriate way:

It can be harmful to separate children from parents ... Try to avoid it. Sometimes, you have to, but then, I have to follow up with the children in a completely different way. (Informant 1)

Separating children from their parents is sometimes necessary, for example, if the parents pose a risk or seem concerningly troubled:

If the parents are very anxious and agitated, then we explain to the children that they may be scared but everything is alright, and that nothing dangerous is going to happen. We reassure the children because ... Once the parents become insecure, it can be contagious, and the children are likely to start feeling insecure. (Informant 14)

If the parents react strongly to their arrest, the new practice is to explain to the children why they are reacting in that way. The police must establish good relationships with both the parents and the children as they are sensitive to each other's reactions:

Getting good communication and a good tone ... with the parents also helps the children ... If it [the situation] escalates with the parents, then it ... creates insecurity and fear in the children. We try to facilitate a process whereby the parents can calm down and we avoid, due to a lack of time or poor communication, escalation with the parents. That is key to how children experience an encounter with the police. We strive to gain control and work with the parents so that their pattern of action is within a remit where we can still create a feeling of security for the children. (Informant 12)

Supporting understanding thus involves providing clear and appropriate information to the parents and the children, with the information adapted according to their age. By explaining the situation, traumatic stress caused by insecurity or misinterpretation of reality can be avoided. If the parents act in an uncontrolled way, the reflective practice is to give children adapted information about why their parents are acting in that way. The child-specific principles involve working with the family as a unit and ensuring that the parents' pattern of behaviour does not thwart the police's efforts to create a feeling of security for the children.

### 5.1.3 *Predictability*

To make the arrest and deportation process predictable for those involved, the police explain to children and their parents what is going to happen and how. Previously, the common practice was the opposite – that is, to act unpredictably – as this was considered a good way to control the situation:

[Previously,] when we had to arrest a family with children, we arrived in the middle of the night, at three o'clock, and we said to the family, "We are from the police. You have to pack your things. You are going somewhere else." That is all they got to know. The truth was that they were going to leave, but not right away; perhaps it would be the next day or the day after that. (Informant 3)

Following the new practice, police officers strive to arrive in the morning, around the time the day normally starts. Direct and detailed information about the process of leaving Norway is given:

Now, we are more direct: "It is time that you are leaving. Tomorrow, at midday, the plane departs. When you board the plane, you are going home." The family no longer gets to the airport thinking, "What is happening now?" (Informant 3)

The purpose of detailed explanations is to increase predictability and reduce the potential for traumatic stress. As Informant 3 explained, knowing what is happening and when it will happen reduces the likelihood that the arrest will be a traumatic experience:

It is wise to provide information that is trauma-minimizing: why we are there, and that they are going to their home country. When ... they have to return to their home country, I believe the best thing for the children is to get the information they need about what is happening now and what is going to happen next. What is going on with the parents now? We give them time to process what is happening, then the opportunity to ask questions, express their feelings and be heard. They must get an opportunity to say what they think about the situation. It is the best thing for children in such a situation. (Informant 4)

Providing detailed information when entering a residence reduces trauma because it limits the room for unpredictability and provides a family with time to process what will happen. The previous practice involved limited discussion of the situation because silence was regarded as "gentler" for the children. Now, the focus is instead on building relationships to ensure the children can handle the information they receive:

It is about building a relationship, informing them about what is going to happen, letting them be involved and trying to make it as predictable and safe as possible, even if in some cases it is terribly difficult. (Informant 3)

Previously, informing the children and explaining the situation was seen as the parents' responsibility. Now, the police officers take on this responsibility to make the situation more predictable for the children:

We used to hold the parents responsible for that [informing the children]. Now, the responsibility for informing the children about what is happening is on us ... Given that we have more knowledge than the parents, it can be better for the children if we tell them. It is important to communicate directly with the children because the parents may not know what to say, or they may not want to tell the children. It is also important to let the parents know that we are going to inform the children. That information should be given to the parents so that we do not undermine their role as parents; it is a mark of our respect for them. (Informant 4)

In this way, the police inform the children about the situation, making the parents aware that they are doing so, including and informing the parents out of respect for them.

In cases where the parents escalated the situation, previously, the children were often left alone. Yet, you must talk to the children and explain what is going to happen during the entire process. (Informant 12)

Officers now strive to give children a foundation on which they can understand how their parents comprehend the situation:

It is very important, to preserve the dignity of the parents, to explain why their parents did or said what they did – perhaps because they are scared or desperate. The idea is to safeguard their dignity. It is also very important for the children ... because their dignity depends on the dignity of the parents. (Informant 4)

Predictability involves giving the family time to process what will happen. As opposed to the former practice of maintaining silence and giving limited information, information and predictability aim to reduce the level of traumatic stress. The police have redefined their task as one that includes informing the children; previously, this was considered the parents' responsibility. The new practice also focuses on the relationship between the parents and the children. If the parents act in a way that scares the children, it is important to explain the situation to the children and, in doing so, encourage their continued respect for their parents. Overall, this practice aims to reduce the likelihood of an arrest becoming a potentially traumatic event.



#### 5.1.4 *Involvement*

The final principle is to involve the parents and the children in the actions that will be taken by establishing direct communication with them and providing opportunities for them to influence their own situation. This enables the parents to reassure and calm their children. Traditionally, children's involvement consisted of packing their toys and personal belongings. In the new practice, involvement still includes packing one's things, but this now holds more than just practical value. Instead, involvement concerns participation, which means the children gain a better understanding of what is happening and play a more active role in the process:

It has always been positive that they pack their belongings, for being involved. It is ... scarier to just be an observer ... You do not get information when you just stand on the sidelines. They [the parents] are unable to focus on the children in such a situation. As a result, they [the children] miss so much information. They do not get the time to be a part of the process. (Informant 16)

Informant 16 described the practice of involvement as opposed to mere observation. Participation and collaboration provide children with access to knowledge about why their parents might act abnormally and, possibly, overlook them. Involving them in what is happening makes the children feel included and not left alone.

The process of packing their belongings keeps the parents busy but previously often left the children uninvolved. In the new practice, the police try to arrange for the children to be with their parents while they pack their belongings:

If they want to be with their parents, we try to arrange for them to be kept together. If they are interested in what is happening, they help with packing or watch. Around everything going on, I ask the children ... questions, such as "What is your name?" and "How old are you?" [As an officer, you must] let the children know that they can ask you questions ... This way, they will not feel overlooked. (Informant 16)

If the children are not dependent on their parents, then their involvement is a collaborative process with the police. Informant 16 described involvement as a dialogue between the dedicated police officer and the child, where the officer focuses on engaging the child in conversation and collaborating with the child while packing.

If a child does not respond or show any interest in becoming involved, the police officers try to involve them anyway to determine whether they are just shy. However, if the child truly does not want to be involved, then the officers will entertain them by bringing them a snack, something to drink or their toys. Even while doing their own thing, the children could feel involved in the process:

Let them feel a little like children ... Sometimes, it may seem as if they have no desire at all to engage with you; then, you should try to see if that is because

they are shy. However, sometimes, I think they should just be allowed to be at peace, too. People need that sometimes. Also, make sure they have what they need in terms of food and drink, and ... bring something that they can play with. (Informant 14)

The interview excerpts illustrate how the principle of involvement is practised by communicating directly with children and by actively providing them with opportunities to influence their situation. This is the opposite of observation, in which involvement is based on watching a process unfold. Children can now decide whether to be actively involved or whether they would prefer to remain observers.

## 6 Discussion

The four child-specific principles have been adopted by police officers at different knowledge levels: Those who have embraced the new reflective practice strive to improve how they instil a sense of *safety* among children by reflecting on their body language and way of speaking. Practically, they also allocate resources to each child, and sufficient time for the arrest, to minimize the harm and stress for both the police officers and children. *Understanding* is the principle according to which police officers explain and provide clear and appropriate information to children, adapted to their age. This helps to avoid trauma and stress caused by insecurity and misinterpretation of reality.

*Predictability* is described as giving the family time to process what is going to happen. As opposed to the previous practice, which was based on minimal communication, detailed information is now provided to avoid unpredictability and reduce trauma and stress. The new practice also focuses on the relationship between the parents and children, supporting collaboration and dialogue and among the family. If the parents act in a way that scares the children, the officers must explain the situation to the children and support their continued respect for their parents, which can prevent the arrest from being perceived as a traumatic event. *Involvement* is practised by communicating with children and providing opportunities for them to influence their situation. Children can decide whether they want to be involved or simply observe the process of, for example, packing their bag. In addition, parents are actively encouraged to involve and support their children.

A main aim of the trauma-informed approach is to “do no harm” by reducing the level of harm or stress felt by the children involved. An interesting finding is that the officers have developed a clear focus on possible negative aftereffects of the arrest owing to such feelings. This is in contrast to the previous practice, where the mission was considered successful if the children remained “quiet” and complete when the family was handed over.

Integrated use of the key principles in a trauma-informed approach demands that officers engage in reflection (i.e. completing and analysing traditional, technical and tactical operations). Schön (1983) contrasted reflection-in-action with technical rationality, noting that with the latter, professional practice is

characterized by procedures in which problems are solved through the rigorous application of science, without allowing for improvisation. Accordingly, police work is often based on conceptual knowledge (Krathwohl, 2002), building on the theories, models and structures of an arrest. Hence, individually they are focused on historically developed working methods for task solving, not reflecting overall organizational changes. Introducing a new working method requires the police force to establish new procedures based on metacognitive knowledge about cognitive tasks, along with contextual and conditional self-knowledge (Schön, 1987).

We regard each officer's individual development of child-specific knowledge as a linear process, from determining the meaning to applying their understanding and analysing the principles – that is, conducting reflection-in-action. Police officers who move beyond a descriptive or practical understanding to a reflective understanding bring technical rationality (Schön, 1987) to the individual level. These police officers express knowing-in-action, or know-how, through their professional judgment. Reflection-in-action encourages the officers to look at the arrest from different perspectives, which helps them understand the stressful situation and scrutinize their personal values, assumptions, and perspectives. Reflection-in-action refers to the quick thinking and reactions that occur during action. Police officers' reflection-in-action allows them to consider why actions are happening and respond by acting in particular ways. Approaching the arrest from different perspectives allows them to reframe their behaviour during an arrest, thereby developing self-knowledge and creating learning opportunities.

Previous research on police encounters with children who experience domestic violence or who are exposed to terrorist attacks has indicated that the police are often unsure how to approach children in vulnerable situations and ensure the children's best interests (Edvardsen, 2019; Kepinska et al., 2017; Langballe & Schultz, 2016; Øverlien, 2012; Øverlien & Aas, 2016). With the potential to provide direction to such officers, the results of this study illustrate that the child-specific principles have improved Norwegian policing practice. Through *reflection*, police officers build knowledge and self-confidence in how to approach children in vulnerable situations. Police officers who had developed a reflective understanding of the child-specific principles expressed the view that the new practice has, on several occasions, reduced the harm or stress created by an arrest for both the participating police officers and their subjects.

Studies have demonstrated that police officers are exposed to complex and stressful situations during the deportation of children (Hansson et al., 2017) and can feel highly stressed while carrying out specific police work (e.g. Gutschmidt & Vera, 2021). In this respect, self-reported stress reduction during the complex police operations of arresting immigrant families is of operational significance for the police. Similarly, officers report that reduced stress among the parents in these families improves the level of collaboration between parents and police, supporting the officers in taking tactical control of the arrest and decreasing the need for restrictions or the use of force.

The findings of this study further illustrate how this new practice is being performed and how individual officers engage in reflection in general, as well as on

the basis of their personal situation – for example, their background, assumptions or feelings – and how reflection affects their work in practice (e.g. their verbal and nonverbal behaviour). Such effects are felt at the level of the individual police officer and collectively impact the wider organizational context. Hence, moving forward, a focus on individual police officers' cognitive processes should be encouraged to place their reflective dialogue within a larger social context, thereby capturing metacognitive knowledge of the child-specific principles' application as an institutional norm. The findings also contribute to the discussion of the use of theories in practice and the significance of experiences when it comes to reflection-in-action (i.e. as reflection is the process that mediates between experience and knowledge).

Beyond this, building a reflective practice at an institutional level demands *reflection-on-action* in a social context (Schön, 1983) or a collective evaluation of responses to improve arrests according to the four child-specific principles. Reflection on the likely consequences of an action is a social matter; it occurs outside the family's residence, after the arrest. To reflect involves thinking deeply about why the children and family acted as they did, what caused the situation, what options were available and why one option was chosen over another. The response to a situation will depend on the police officers' knowledge and experience, understanding of theories on traumatic/stressful events and the values the officers hold, which might develop through reflection-on-action. The principles are developed to fit into daily police practice but might be difficult to apply to the practice of the police as a larger system. Hence, the lack of reflecting-on-action is an issue changing the wider practice. Framing the principles in an organizational context should include critical evaluation of the practice as a part of the implementation project.

Training police officers to analyse their use of the principles requires a learning environment in which the key principles are reflected on, broken into parts, and related to one another and the overall picture (Krathwohl, 2002). We view learning as a multilevel concept that applies to both the individual and society and ties them together. In that context, reflection-on-action might create opportunities for learning as individuals' responses might be shared with others. As such, learning happens through and from experience (Gherardi, 2006), both individual and collective, thereby yielding new insights into a subjective and personal set of circumstances. When implementing the principles, the evaluative approach of organizational change could have been more focused on as a part of the implementation process.

### 6.1 Implications for Institutional Practice

To develop a stronger reflective practice within the NPIS, there is a need to progress from descriptive and practical understandings to a reflective understanding during an arrest. The NPIS could benefit from adopting the concept of critical reflection to truly become a learning organization (Christopher, 2015). Reflection-on-action occurs after the event, through analysis and evaluation to gain insight that will help improve future practice. Although individual reflective understanding might facilitate an officer's professional development, fostering good institutional

practices is a matter for both the individual and the organization. Hence, there is a need to facilitate collective learning and further organizational development. To meet the pressing challenges of contemporary policing (i.e. preventing traumatic stress and “do no harm”), the organization must encourage and support reflective moments at work, helping those with descriptive and practical understandings of the child-specific principles to become aware of the significance of contextual factors and, ultimately, supporting them to develop a reflective understanding.

Reflection is not a linear process but a cyclical one; it leads to the development of new ideas, which are then used to plan the following stages of learning (Schön, 1987). Building a reflective practice requires facilitating continuous reflective understanding at an institutional level, as it is a circular process that is never completed or free of the need to review situations further or in different contexts. Hence, we suggest creating institutional activities that promote reflection-on-action in the new trauma-informed era.

Institutionally, the skills learned from individual experiences must be promulgated and developed by systematically using methods to build new understandings and shape action in unfolding situations. In Norway, the police conduct tactical debriefing and defusing as two separate activities (only in special cases), whereby a tactical debriefing session is a professional review of the planning and conduct of an assignment, whereas a defusing session is a support conversation with the purpose of processing emotions and impressions (The Norwegian Police Directorate, 2020). A trauma-informed policing practice involves reflective understanding in and on action, which incorporates elements from both defusing and debriefing. Therefore, we suggest that the reflection process should be developed to become more defined and anchored within the structure of the policing work that is carried out. We suggest that reflection in and on action should be systematically conducted and reported through technical debriefing and defusing sessions in practice.

## 7 Conclusion

Most police officers in this study demonstrated a clear shift in practice, where they adopted key child-specific principles in the new policing practice. The focus on “doing no harm” by reducing the level of harm or stress experienced by children during an arrest has established an operational awareness of the need to prevent possible negative aftereffects. The new practice appears to reduce police officers’ stress during and after an arrest. The results further demonstrate how police officers operationalize their theoretical “know-how” of the four child-specific principles in practice. Individually, the police officers’ reflection on their application of the principles reduces the stress encountered. Police officers demonstrate clear examples of reflection-in-action; however, there appears to be a lack of systematic reflection-on-action to achieve organizational learning activities. Institutionally, the NPIS should consider facilitating reflective moments at work to expand reflective understanding and make it circular.

To further adapt and institutionalize the trauma-informed approach, we suggest the creation of institutional activities that promote reflection-on-action with the goal of further developing and strengthen the institutionalization of the new practice. The findings of this study can inform police work by providing new knowledge on how officers' understanding of the principles is applied in practice and could facilitate the development of methods for organizational learning and reflective practice in police forces.

The results contribute to our knowledge of the level of adoption of the new policing practice and inform further development and quality assurance of the trauma-informed approach within the NPIS. It also contributes to the discussion about the use of theories in practice and the value of metacognitive knowledge and experiences when it comes to reflection-in-action. Working with implementation of new practices, these results contribute to the discussion about including an evaluative approach on the organizational level as a part of the implementation process. More generally, this study contributes to the field of studies on police officers' work and reflection on the arrest and deportation of families with children.

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