J Nurs Soc Stud Public Health Rehabil 3–4, 2026; DOI: 10.32725/jnss.2026.016

Original research article

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE METHODOLOGICAL GUIDE: ASSESSING THE SITUATION OF THE CHILD AND THEIR FAMILY IN CASES OF PARENTAL CONFLICT

Petra Vašinová *, Jitka Vacková

University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, České Budějovice, Czech Republic

Abstract

Background: Assessing the family situation is a key component of the social and legal protection of children. However, in cases of conflictual separation or divorce between parents, workers in the social and legal protection of children face specific challenges, including the high emotional burden on parents, the difficulty of capturing the child's perspective, and working under time pressure.

Objective: The aim of this article is to analyze how workers at the Authority for the Social and Legal Protection of Children evaluate the current methodological guide "Vyhodnocení situace dítěte a jeho rodiny" (Assessing the situation of the child and their family), published by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in 2020, particularly in the context of parental conflict.

Methods: A qualitative study based on one focus group with five child protection workers from various regions of the Czech Republic. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Results: The results show that the methodological guide is perceived as a useful framework that supports the structured assessment of the family's situation and the collection of relevant information. At the same time, however, participants pointed out its generality, administrative burden, and limited applicability in cases of parental conflict. In particular, the insufficient focus on the dynamics of conflict between parents, potential manipulation, and the distinction between parental narratives and the child's needs were identified as problematic.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that the current methodological guide provides an important general framework for assessing the family situation. However, in cases of parental conflict, it may need to be supplemented with conflict-specific guidelines, questions, and indicators that support a more consistent focus on the child's needs.

Keywords: *Assessment of the child's situation; Child protection authority; High-conflict divorce; Parental conflict; Social and legal protection of children; Social work*

INTRODUCTION

Assessing a family's situation is one of the core activities of the Authority for the Social and Legal Protection of Children (OSPOD). Under the law, this activity is defined as the regular assessment of a family, particularly with regard to determining whether a child is at risk and to the nature and scope of measures necessary to protect the child (Act No. 359/1999 Coll.). The purpose of the assessment is to obtain a comprehensive picture of how the family functions, the child's needs, the child's best interests, and circumstances that may adversely affect the child's development. In Czech practice, this process involves the use of the forms and methodological guidance contained in "Vyhodnocení situace dítěte a jeho rodiny" (Assessing the situation of the child and their family; Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2020a). It is intended to help OSPOD staff assess the child's needs, their family environment, risk and protective factors, and options for supporting both the child

and the family. At the same time, it provides a structure for collecting and evaluating relevant information.

In cases of parental conflict, the family assessment takes on specific significance. Here, OSPOD workers encounter families under heightened emotional strain (Koppejan-Luitze et al., 2021), where the child's needs may become entangled with parental conflict, competing expectations, and differing accounts of the family situation (Kallinen et al., 2026; Schrodt, 2026). Therefore, assessment does not merely entail the administrative collection of data regarding the child and family, but also a professional evaluation of how parental conflict affects the child's daily functioning, relationships, and sense of security.

In the context of a high-conflict divorce, the family assessment must be understood not only in relation to the dynamics of the parental conflict itself, but also within the broader organizational and institutional context of child protection practice. OSPOD staff often operate under conditions of high workloads, staffing constraints, increasing caseloads, and extensive administrative requirements (Hejnová, 2021; Pascoe et al., 2023). These circumstances may limit the scope for more in-depth analytical work with the family, interviews with the child, and the coordination of information obtained from other involved parties. The quality standards (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2014) define the recommended maximum number of families per worker, while the Public Defender of Rights (Family Network, 2023) highlights the overburdening of OSPOD, understaffing of offices, and the growing volume of responsibilities.

At the same time, cases of high-conflict divorce are often associated with the involvement of multiple actors (Department for Education, 2023; NSPCC Learning, 2025), whose uncoordinated approach can complicate rather than facilitate the assessment process. In this context, methodological support becomes increasingly important, as it not only provides staff with a general framework but also helps them effectively structure information, distinguish essential facts, and more quickly reach a professionally justified conclusion regarding the situation of the child and family.

The current methodological guide (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2020a) provides a general framework for assessing child endangerment. The question remains, however, to what extent this framework corresponds to the specifics of cases in which parental conflict is a significant factor. In these situations, OSPOD workers may need more specific methodological guidelines to help them capture the impact of parental conflict on the child, the extent of the child's involvement in the parents' dispute, or other circumstances affecting the child's well-being.

The aim of this article is to analyze how OSPOD workers evaluate the current methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family" in terms of its strengths and limitations in cases of parental conflict. The article is based on a qualitative focus group with five OSPOD workers, and focuses on how participants perceive the usability, comprehensibility, and practical limitations of this material when working with families experiencing high-conflict separation or divorce.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was conducted using a qualitative research design and focused on evaluating the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family", from the perspective of staff at the Authority for the Social and Legal Protection of Children (OSPOD). The aim of the study was to explore how OSPOD workers perceive the practical usability, strengths, and limitations of this material when assessing families in the context of parental conflict. The study was exploratory in nature and was not intended to provide a representative evaluation of the methodological guide across all OSPOD offices in the Czech Republic. Data were collected through one focus group with five participants and subsequently analyzed using thematic analysis.

Analysis of the methodological guide

The subject of the evaluation was the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family" (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2020a), published by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in 2020. In the practice of child protection services, this material is used as a guide for the structured assessment of the situation of the child and their family, including the child's needs, fam-

ily environment, risk and protective factors, and possible forms of support for the child and family. Within this study, the methodological guide was examined specifically in terms of its perceived practical usability by OSPOD workers in cases involving parental conflict.

Research design and participants

The research was conducted using a qualitative research strategy. The qualitative approach was chosen because of the exploratory nature of the research question and the aim of obtaining an in-depth understanding of OSPOD workers' experiences with the practical use of the methodological guide. The study sought to capture how workers described its strengths, limitations, and potential utility when assessing families experiencing parental conflict or conflictual separation or divorce.

Participants were recruited using purposive non-probability sampling. The main inclusion criterion was professional relevance to the research topic, particularly practical experience in assessing the situation of children and families within the system of social and legal child protection, and experience of working with families affected by parental conflict, divorce, or high-conflict separation. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the aim of the qualitative study was to obtain information-rich accounts from professionals with direct experience relevant to the research question, rather than to obtain a statistically representative sample of OSPOD workers (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Recruitment was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, all 33 OSPOD offices and 306 potential social workers working in the field of child protection in three regions of the Czech Republic – the Liberec, Ústí nad Labem, and Karlovy Vary regions – were approached. As official statistics specifically documenting the prevalence of high-conflict divorce are not available in the Czech Republic (Barvíková, 2019), the regional divorce rate per 1,000 inhabitants was used as an indirect indicator when selecting the regions (Czech Statistical Office, 2024).

Potential participants were initially contacted by email. This was followed by telephone contact with the managers of all 33 OSPOD offices, who were asked to inform potentially eligible workers about the study. Three OSPOD workers agreed to participate at this stage. The most frequently reported reason for non-participation was workload and limited time capacity.

Due to the low response rate, recruitment was subsequently expanded. In the second stage, an expert familiar with Cochem practice in the Czech Republic provided contacts for six professionals with experience in the field of high-conflict divorce. All six professionals were approached and invited to participate in the study. This additional recruitment strategy was used to reach professionals with particularly relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation.

The final focus-group sample consisted of five OSPOD workers from different regions of the Czech Republic. The sample included two participants in managerial positions and three participants involved in direct case work with children and families. Their professional experience in the field of child protection ranged from approximately 6 to 30 years. This variation made it possible to include perspectives associated with different lengths of professional experience and different roles within the child protection system.

The sample size must be interpreted in relation to the exploratory qualitative design of the study. The purpose was not to achieve statistical representativeness or to generalize the findings to all OSPOD workers in the Czech Republic, but to obtain detailed and contextually grounded accounts from professionals with substantial experience relevant to the research topic. The five-person focus group allowed for in-depth discussion and interaction among participants, while allowing different professional perspectives to be expressed and compared.

At the same time, the small sample and the use of a single focus group represent an important limitation of the study. The findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory and as reflecting the experiences and perceptions of the participating professionals, rather than as a generally valid assessment of the methodological guide or of OSPOD practice across the Czech Republic.

Data collection

Data were collected through one focus group with five OSPOD workers. The focus group formed part of a broader dissertation research project concerned with the assessment of

families in the context of parental conflict and high-conflict divorce. The broader research examines different aspects of the assessment process and methodological support available to OSPOD workers. For the purposes of the present article, only the part of the focus-group material specifically concerning the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family", its practical usability, and its perceived strengths and limitations was included in the analysis. The findings presented in this article therefore represent a focused analysis of one component of the broader dissertation research rather than the complete qualitative dataset.

The use of a focus group was considered appropriate because it enabled the researchers to not only identify individual experiences and opinions but also to examine how these views were developed, supplemented, or challenged through interaction among professionals with experience of similar cases (Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger a Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997).

The focus group was conducted in December 2025 and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The discussion was moderated by the author of the study according to a pre-prepared semi-structured discussion guide. The broader focus-group discussion addressed current practices in assessing families affected by parental conflict, the use of methodological and assessment tools, barriers encountered during family assessment, risk factors affecting children, and professionals' needs regarding methodological support.

Within the section analyzed for the present article, participants were specifically asked to describe how the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family" supported their assessment practice, which aspects they considered useful, and in which situations they encountered limitations or difficulties when using the material.

The semi-structured format ensured that the same principal areas were addressed, while allowing participants to elaborate on issues they considered particularly relevant and to respond to the experiences and views expressed by other group members.

The focus group was audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The transcript was anonymized to prevent the identification of individual participants and their workplaces. The anonymized transcript constituted the primary dataset for the analysis presented in this article.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which provides a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This analytical approach was selected because of the exploratory character of the study and its focus on understanding professionals' experiences and perceptions of the methodological guide.

The analysis was conducted iteratively in several stages. First, the author repeatedly read the relevant sections of the verbatim transcript in order to become familiar with the data and recorded preliminary analytical notes. The material was then subjected to open coding, during which meaningful segments related to the research aim were identified and assigned descriptive codes. Coding was conducted using ATLAS.ti software, which enabled individual codes to remain directly linked to the corresponding sections of the original transcript.

In the next stage, the codes were compared and grouped into broader categories on the basis of similarities and differences in meaning. These categories were subsequently organized into broader themes representing recurring patterns in participants' perceptions of the usability, strengths, and limitations of the methodological guide. Attention was paid not only to views shared across participants but also to divergent or contrasting experiences.

The developing thematic structure was repeatedly reviewed against the original transcript. Codes, categories, and themes were revised, merged, or differentiated where necessary to ensure that the themes were internally coherent, distinct from one another, and supported by the underlying data. In the final stage, the themes were defined, named, and interpreted in relation to the research aim.

Several procedures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness and transparency of the analysis. The author repeatedly returned to the original transcript during the coding and theme-development process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' statements. Analytical notes

were maintained throughout the process to document decisions made during coding and theme development. The use of ATLAS.ti enabled a transparent link to be maintained between the final themes, individual codes, and original data excerpts. In addition, the analysis considered both recurring patterns and contrasting accounts rather than treating frequency alone as an indicator of analytical importance.

Given that the analysis was based on one focus group with five participants, no claim of thematic saturation or generalizability is made. The thematic findings are understood as context-dependent and exploratory. Their purpose is to identify relevant patterns and issues emerging from the experiences of the participating OSPOD workers, and to provide a basis for further investigation in larger and more diverse samples.

Ethical aspects

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research. Participants were informed in advance about the study's objectives, the method of data processing, the voluntary nature of participation, and the option to withdraw at any time. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the research and to the processing of anonymized data.

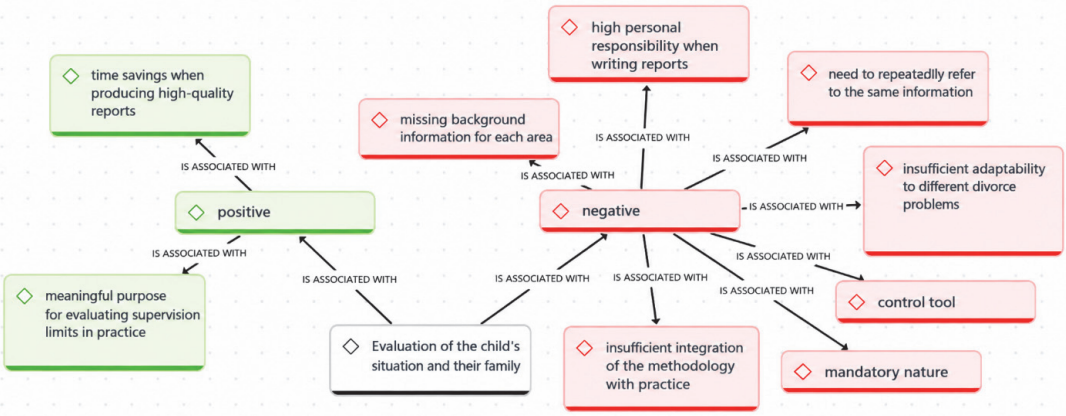
All data were anonymized, and the text does not include any information that would allow for the identification of specific staff members, their workplaces, or specific family cases. The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice on March 31, 2026, under Ref. No. 004/2026.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the focus-group segment concerning the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family" revealed two main areas: the perceived benefits and the perceived limitations of the material. The benefits primarily related to the meaningfulness of the assessment itself and the potential time savings it could offer if implemented effectively. The limitations were mainly associated with administrative complexity, repetition of information, the mandatory nature of the assessment, insufficient adaptation to divorce-related issues, and limited integration of the methodology with the daily practice of the OSPOD.

Perceived benefits of the methodological guide

Although focus group participants devoted significant attention to the limitations of the current methodological guide, their statements also indicated that they consider the



Source: Original research, data collected as part of the GAJU 140/2025/S project "Conflictual Divorces"; processed in ATLAS.ti

Fig. 1 – Benefits and limitations of the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family"

very purpose of assessing the situation of the child and their family to be meaningful. The assessment was not rejected by respondents as an unnecessary tool, but rather as a process that has the potential to contribute to a deeper understanding of the child's and the family's situation. Participants recognized that the systematic processing of information can help a professional better organize their understanding of the family situation, the relationships among individual family members, the child's needs, and risk and protective factors.

Participants generally viewed the purpose of the assessment positively, despite the limitations that workers experience in their daily practice when conducting it. Respondents pointed out that a well-prepared assessment can serve as an important foundation for further work with the family. R1: *"Honestly, the tool is great. If it's done the way it's supposed to be and serves its intended purpose, it's fantastic."* It can help ensure that the worker does not rely solely on partial or randomly obtained information, providing a more comprehensive picture of the child's and family's situation. In this sense, the assessment was understood as a tool that can promote greater clarity regarding the case and assist in subsequent decision-making regarding appropriate steps.

Another perceived benefit was the potential to save time if the evaluation is well-prepared. Participants noted that a well-prepared evaluation can be reused in subsequent work, such as when planning support, communicating with other experts, or navigating previously gathered information. According to the respondents, if the document is clearly organized and of high quality in terms of content, it can reduce the need to repeatedly search for information and facilitate follow-up work with the family. R2: *"To me, it seems similar to when I hand over a case file – I prepare it well, and that saves social workers a lot of time."*

Overall, the methodological guide was perceived primarily as a tool with the potential to structure the professional reasoning of OSPOD staff and create a clear foundation for further work with the family. Its positive function is particularly evident when it is not merely filled out as a formality but is used as a living working document that supports understanding of the child's and family's situation.

Perceived limitations of the methodological guide

In addition to the perceived benefits, focus group participants also pointed out the limitations of the current methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family" (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2020a). These limitations did not relate solely to the content of the form itself, but also to the conditions of its practical use in the daily work of OSPOD. The respondents' statements indicated that while the material is understood as a meaningful tool for structured assessment, its practical utility may be undermined by administrative burdens, insufficient adaptation to divorce-related issues, and limited alignment of the methodology with the real needs of staff.

Based on a thematic analysis, three main sub-thematic areas were identified within the perceived limitations. The first concerns the administrative and formal demands of the assessment. The second relates to the material's insufficient adaptation to cases of high-conflict parental separation. The third highlights the limited connection between the methodological guide and practice.

Administrative and formal burden

The first significant area of limitations relates to the administrative and formal demands of the methodological guide. Participants described how, in practice, assessing the situation of the child and their family involves extensive data processing, which can be time-consuming, especially given the high caseloads and other responsibilities of OSPOD staff. They identified the need to repeatedly enter the same or similar information in different sections of the documentation as particularly problematic. R3: *"... you're constantly just CTRL C CTRL V, and it all keeps overlapping – health, emotional development, and so on, identity..."* According to the respondents, this aspect reduces the practical effectiveness of the material and can lead to the assessment being perceived as an administrative obligation rather than a tool that supports a deeper professional evaluation of the child's situation.

The administrative burden was also closely linked to the mandatory nature of the assessment. Respondents pointed out that the obligation to prepare an assessment can, in some

situations, undermine its original purpose. R4: *"Unfortunately, the detailed assessment has become an obligation for us, just so it's there..."* In practice, respondents perceived it more as a formal requirement that must be met. Participants primarily associated this shift from professional support to a formal procedure with time pressure, the scope of the workload, and documentation requirements.

Another topic was that staff can perceive the evaluation as a control tool. R3: *"... and as a tool of a certain kind of control, I don't know, well, and we're a bit hesitant about the detailed evaluation, and for us it's more of a burden than a help."* Participants pointed out that the way the document is prepared is not only significant for the actual work with the family, but may subsequently be assessed by other entities or higher authorities. This was also linked to the worker's high personal responsibility when drafting it. R1: *"And there's no support there; we're just thrown into it like pawns, and told to basically do it however we want at our own risk? And if it goes wrong, we'll take you down, right? That's just completely..."* Respondents indicated that the worker must record sufficient information in the document while also professionally justifying their conclusions, which can increase uncertainty and concern that their professional judgment may be challenged.

Overall, this area shows that the administrative and formal demands of the methodological guide can undermine its practical usability. Although the assessment has the potential to structure the worker's professional reasoning, in real-world practice its benefits may be limited by the time burden, repetition of information, its mandatory nature, and the perception of the document as a control tool.

Insufficient adaptation to divorce issues

Another significant limitation related to the fact that respondents did not perceive the methodological material as sufficiently adapted to the specifics of a conflictual separation or divorce of parents. Participants noted that while the material provides a general framework for assessing a child at risk, it pays less attention to situations in which parental conflict is the main issue. R1: *"... this is a tool used to assess the entire spectrum of risks to a child. Yeah, that could include poverty. I don't know, neglect, abuse, drugs, and so on. What I'm missing here is precisely that distinction – that from this assessment, it would be nice to have something similar."* In these cases, respondents noted that they need to capture not only basic information about the child and the family environment, but also the nature of the conflict between the parents, their ability to cooperate, their communication style, the extent of the child's involvement in the dispute, and the impact of the conflict on the child's daily functioning.

Another specific limitation respondents highlighted was the lack of a more detailed set of questions for each area of assessment. They indicated that the methodological guide defines the areas the worker should focus on, but does not always provide sufficiently specific questions to guide them during interviews with parents, the child, or other involved individuals. Workers must therefore determine for themselves which questions to ask, how to gather information, and how to steer the conversation in order to ascertain the facts necessary for assessing the child's situation. R5: *It would be a better way of approaching those topics and questions – I'd be helped by some sort of set of specific questions. How do I ask in a way that actually gets me a description from the child about, say, their identity? Those are actually the areas in the assessment that are the hardest for me, and in my experience, they're actually the hardest for the clients too. Yeah, describing the child's identity, emotional warmth – those are tough, really tough areas..."* Respondents noted that guiding questions could be categorized by the child's age group, as the method of communicating with the child and the type of information gathered vary depending on their age and developmental level. In addition to the questions themselves, respondents also pointed out the possibility of adding specific examples that would show workers what answers might be relevant and what situations might signal an increased need for attention. The set of guiding questions and examples was seen as particularly important for new or less experienced OSPOD staff members, who may not have enough experience to independently formulate appropriate questions and recognize which information is essential for assessing the child's situation. R3: *"... so, a questionnaire or a set of questions? I think*

it would help many colleagues, even the less experienced ones, and they would have something to rely on."

Overall, this area shows that respondents did not perceive the problem as lying in the existence of the methodological guide itself, but rather its limited sensitivity to the specific dynamics of parental conflict and the lack of concrete guidelines for working with these cases. The material was described as a useful general framework for assessing child endangerment, but according to respondents, it does not provide sufficiently concrete support for situations in which the child's needs intersect with conflict between parents. Participants particularly mentioned the absence of a set of guiding questions for specific areas that would guide the worker during interviews with parents, the child, and other involved parties. According to them, these questions could be differentiated by the child's age group and supplemented with examples. Respondents associated this structured support primarily with the needs of new or less experienced OSPOD workers, who, through practice, are still learning to identify what information is essential for assessing a child's situation in a parental conflict.

Limited alignment between methodological guidance and practice

Within the limitations of the methodological guide, the issue of inconsistent and insufficiently practice-based methodological support also emerged. Respondents agreed that they do not perceive the methodological guide coming *"from above"* as sufficiently connected to everyday OSPOD practice. In their statements, they linked this problem to the feeling that frontline workers are given tools that are not sufficiently systematic, consistent, or practically usable for day-to-day decision-making. However, they distinguished between methodological support at the regional level, which was evaluated more positively, and methodological tools created at the central level. R3: *"Inconsistency. I'll admit that I feel like the methodologies from the ministry are created by people who've never been in the field in their lives."*

Hence in this statement, the limitation of the methodological guide was not associated solely with its content, but also with the way in which methodological support is perceived by practitioners. Respondents also cited a lack of practical support, which, in their experience, increases practitioners' uncertainty when using methodological tools in specific cases.

Overall, this area shows that respondents perceived limitations not only in the content of the material itself, but also in the way methodological support can be translated into the daily practice of OSPOD.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this exploratory study suggest that OSPOD workers do not perceive the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family" (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2020a) as inherently problematic. Rather, participants distinguished between the underlying purpose of structured assessment and the way in which the material functions in everyday practice. They valued assessment as a process that can help organize information about the child and family, identify relevant needs and risks, and provide a basis for subsequent professional intervention. This corresponds with the intention of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, according to which assessment and the Individual Child Protection Plan (IPOD) should support the identification of the child's needs, risk and protective factors, and the planning of appropriate support for the child and family (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2020b).

At the same time, participants' accounts indicate that the perceived usefulness of the material depends on how it is embedded in professional practice. The same assessment framework may be experienced as supportive when it helps workers structure complex information, but as burdensome when its completion is perceived primarily as a formal obligation. This distinction is important because it suggests that the problem may not lie solely in the content of the methodological guide itself, but also in the organizational and administrative context in which it is used.

One of the most prominent tensions identified in the data concerned the difference between the methodological guide as a professional support tool and its perception as an administrative or monitoring instrument. Participants referred to repetitive documenta-

tion, the mandatory nature of the assessment process, the level of responsibility placed on individual workers, and concerns regarding subsequent inspection or control. These findings can be interpreted within the broader discussion of the bureaucratization of social work. In their systematic synthesis of qualitative studies, Pascoe et al. (2023) show that bureaucratic and managerial cultures may negatively influence both social workers and service users by creating tension between administrative requirements and meaningful direct work with clients. From this perspective, the findings of the present study suggest that even a methodologically justified assessment framework may lose part of its practical value if workers experience its completion primarily as a requirement of organizational accountability rather than as support for professional reasoning.

A second important finding concerns the limited sensitivity of the methodological guide to the specific dynamics of parental conflict. Participants described the material as providing a broad framework for assessing the child and family, but as offering less guidance in cases in which parental conflict itself constitutes the central feature of the family situation. In such cases, workers may need to assess not only general family functioning but also contradictory parental narratives, the intensity and dynamics of the conflict, the degree to which the child is drawn into the dispute, and the consequences of the conflict for the child's everyday life and well-being.

This finding is consistent with international literature indicating that highly conflictual separations constitute a particularly demanding context for child protection practice. Sudland (2020) points to the complexity of working with parental conflict and to the need for clearer professional mandates, training, and support for practitioners. The findings of the present study extend this discussion by suggesting that a general assessment framework may not always provide sufficient structure for situations in which professionals are required to distinguish between parental disagreement, escalating conflict, and circumstances in which the conflict may begin to threaten the child's well-being. The issue therefore appears to concern not simply whether an assessment tool is available, but whether the tool is sufficiently responsive to the specific characteristics of the cases in which it is applied.

Participants also emphasized the lack of more specific guiding questions for individual areas of assessment. Although the methodological guide identifies domains that should be considered, respondents indicated that it does not always provide sufficiently concrete support for translating these domains into questions that can be used in interviews with parents, children, or other involved persons. The need for age-sensitive questions and practical examples was particularly emphasized.

This finding can be interpreted in relation to the concept of the practical or ecological usability of assessment tools. Lätsch et al. (2021) argue that assessment tools should not be evaluated solely according to their internal methodological qualities, but also according to whether they make sense to practitioners, can be integrated into everyday practice, and correspond to the organizational setting in which they are expected to function. From this perspective, participants' calls for more specific questions and examples should not necessarily be understood as a demand for a more rigid instrument. Rather, they may reflect a need for a methodological guide that translates general assessment domains into practical guidance while still leaving room for professional judgment.

This issue is particularly relevant in relation to child-centered practice. Kallinen et al. (2026) describe child-centered work in highly conflictual separations as a multidimensional process involving the child's participation, work with parents, and collaboration among professionals. Their findings also emphasize the importance of professional support, training, awareness of one's own expertise, and interdisciplinary cooperation. The present study points in a similar direction. Participants indicated that broad methodological categories may be particularly difficult to operationalize for workers with less experience, who may find it challenging to determine which information is essential and how to explore sensitive areas of family functioning.

This suggests that the relationship between structured methodological guidance and professional judgment should not be viewed as oppositional. More detailed guid-

ance does not necessarily imply replacing professional expertise with a standardized checklist. On the contrary, appropriately designed prompts, examples, age-sensitive questions, and indicative risk areas may support professional judgment by helping workers identify issues that warrant further exploration. Such support may be especially relevant in complex parental-conflict cases, where information is often incomplete, contradictory, or strongly influenced by the perspectives and interests of the parents.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the principal challenge may lie in the tension between the broad, general nature of the existing methodological framework and the specific assessment demands posed by parental conflict. From the perspective of the participants, the material can provide a useful structure for assessment, but it may offer insufficient practical guidance when workers are required to understand the dynamics of highly conflictual parental relationships and their impact on the child.

Rather than suggesting that the existing methodological guide should be replaced in its entirety, the findings point to the possible value of supplementing it with conflict-specific methodological support. This could include age-differentiated questions, situational examples, indicative areas of risk, or guidance for exploring issues such as the child's involvement in parental conflict and possible manipulative behavior. Any such additions should, however, function as support for professional judgment rather than as a substitute for individualized assessment.

Given the exploratory design of the study, these implications should be interpreted cautiously. The findings are based on one focus group with five OSPOD workers and therefore cannot be considered representative of the views or practices of OSPOD workers across the Czech Republic. They should instead be understood as identifying practice-based issues that emerged from the experiences of a small group of professionals with relevant expertise. Further research involving larger and more diverse samples would be needed to examine whether these perceptions are shared more broadly and to evaluate the practical usefulness of any proposed modifications to the existing methodological guide.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis is based on a single focus group with five OSPOD workers. Although the participants were purposively selected because of their relevant professional experience, the small sample limits the range of perspectives that could be captured and restricts the transferability of the findings to other OSPOD offices and professional contexts. The results should therefore be understood as exploratory and context-dependent, rather than as representative of social and legal child protection practice across the Czech Republic.

Second, participation was voluntary and the recruitment process resulted in a relatively low response rate, despite a broader initial outreach to OSPOD workers. It is therefore possible that professionals who chose to participate had a particular interest in, or experience with, parental conflict and methodological assessment, which may have influenced the perspectives represented in the study.

Third, the study reflects only the perspectives of OSPOD workers. The views of parents, children, courts, attorneys, experts, and other professionals involved in conflictual separations and divorces were not included in the analysis. Including these perspectives in future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strengths and limitations of the methodological guide and of its use within the broader system of child protection.

Finally, the analysis presented in this article represents only one focused component of a broader dissertation research project. For the purposes of this study, attention was limited specifically to participants' evaluation of the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family" (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2020a), particularly its perceived usability, strengths, and limitations in cases involving parental conflict. The findings therefore provide an in-depth but partial insight into one specific aspect of the broader research topic. Further research involving larger and more diverse samples and additional stakeholder perspectives is needed to examine whether the themes identified in this exploratory study are also present in other professional and regional contexts.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the study was to analyze how OSPOD workers evaluate the methodological guide "Assessing the situation of the child and their family" in the context of parental conflict. The results show that respondents did not reject the principle of structured assessment. On the contrary, they appreciated its meaningful purpose and potential to create a structured foundation for understanding the situation of the child and family. The perceived benefits of the material were associated primarily with the ability to systematically organize information and, when used effectively, facilitate further work with the family.

At the same time, however, practitioners pointed out several limitations of the current methodological guide. These primarily concerned administrative and formal complexity, the repetition of information, the mandatory nature of the assessment, and the high level of personal responsibility placed on the practitioner during its completion. Another significant issue was the material's insufficient adaptation to divorce-related issues. Respondents noted that the material provides a general framework for assessing the situation of the child and family, but does not offer sufficiently concrete guidance for working with cases where parental conflict is the primary issue.

The results further indicate a need for more specific methodological support, particularly in the form of guided sets of questions for individual areas of assessment, practical examples, and age-appropriate questions for children. Respondents associated these elements primarily with the needs of new or less experienced OSPOD workers. Overall, the study suggests that the current methodological guide can be viewed as a useful basic framework. However, in cases of parental conflict, it could be supplemented with more specific and practically applicable guidelines.

Funding
The study was conducted as part of the grant project "Conflictual Divorces", registration number GAJU 140/2025/S, supported by the Grant Agency of the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice. The project ran from February 1, 2025, to December 31, 2026. The principal investigator of the project is Petra Vašinová.

Conflict of interest
The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

REFERENCES

1. Act No. 359/1999 Coll., on the socio-legal protection of children. In: Collection of Laws of the Czech Republic, issue 111/1999.
2. Barvíková J (2019). Zpráva z fokusních skupin. Dítě v rodičovském konfliktu. Praha: VÚPSV. [online] [cit. 2024-08-13]. Available from: https://katalog.vupsv.cz/Fulltext/vv_003.pdf
3. Braun V, Clarke V (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qual Res Psychol 3(2): 77–101. DOI: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
4. Czech Statistical Office (2024). Vývoj obyvatelstva České republiky – data za rok 2023. Praha: Český statistický úřad. [online] [cit. 2025-11-04]. Available from: https://csu.gov.cz/produkty/vyvoj-obyvatelstva-ceske-republiky-3dxmkcjk5d
5. Department for Education (2023). Improving multi-agency information sharing: Government policy on information sharing and the use of a consistent child identifier. London. [online] [cit. 2026-09-10]. Available from: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-multi-agency-information-sharing
6. Family Network (2023). Sociálních pracovníků na OSPOD je nedostatek. Někteří pracují až s dvojnásobným počtem ohrožených dětí, upozorňuje právnička z kanceláře ombudsmana. Rodinná síť. [online] [cit. 2026-05-04]. Available from: https://www.rodinnasit.cz/ze-sveta-nrp/socialnich-pracovniku-je-nedostatek-nekteri-pracuji-az-s-dvojnasobnym-poctem-ohrozenych-deti-upozornuje-pravnicka-z-kancelare-ombudsmana/
7. Hejnová K (2021). Praxe oddělení sociálně právní ochrany dětí při řešení rodičovských sporů. Fórum sociální práce 2: 9–19. [online] [cit. 2026-09-10]. Available from: https://forumsocialniprace.ff.cuni.cz/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2021/12/Katerina_Hejnova_9-19.pdf

8. Kallinen K, Rautio S, Nikupeteri A, Vornanen R, Repo A, Laitinen M (2026). Social worker's perspectives on a child-centred approach in high-conflict separations – three dimensions of a child-centred approach. Child Adolesc Soc Work J. DOI: 10.1007/s10560-026-01084-8.
9. Kitzinger J (1995). Qualitative Research: Introducing Focus Groups. BMJ 311(7000): 299–302. DOI: 10.1136/bmj.311.7000.299.
10. Koppejan-Luitze HS, Wal R, Kluwer E, Visser M, Finkenauer C (2021). Are intense negative emotions a risk for complex divorces? An examination of the role of emotions in divorced parents and co-parenting concerns. J Soc Pers Relat 38(2): 765–782. DOI: 10.1177/0265407520972189.
11. Krueger RA, Casey MA (2015). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research. 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 252 p.
12. Lätsch DC, Voll P, Jung R, Jud A (2021). Evaluating Assessment Tools in Child Protection: A Conceptual Framework of Internal and Ecological Requirements: A Conceptual Framework of Internal and Ecological Requirements. Child Abuse Rev 30(6): 508–519. DOI: 10.1002/car.2728.
13. Morgan DL (1997). Focus Groups as Qualitative Research. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 80 p. DOI: 10.4135/9781412984287.
14. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2014). Manuál implementace standardů kvality sociálně-právní ochrany pro orgány sociálně-právní ochrany. Praha: Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí. [online] [cit. 2025-04-04]. Available from: https://mpsv.gov.cz/cms/documents/f655f2d6-6d61-ae05-106e-d5e91f083747/manual_OSPOD.pdf
15. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2020a). Vyhodnocení situace dítěte a jeho rodiny. Praha: Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí. [online] [cit. 2025-04-04]. Available from: https://mpsv.gov.cz/cms/documents/b9c3f089-55ef-90af-ee1b-93ee78aa0571/Formul%C3%A1%C5%99%2BVyhodnocen%C3%AD_MPSV.pdf
16. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (2020b). Průvodce formuláři – Vyhodnocení situace dítěte a jeho rodiny a IPOD. Praha: Ministerstvo práce a sociálních věcí. [online] [cit. 2025-04-04]. Available from: https://www.mpsv.cz/cms/documents/f19ad7f3-8213-7f5d-c525-20ae86caad65/Pr%C5%AFvodce%2Bformul%C3%A1%C5%99i%2Bvyhodnocen%C3%AD_IPOD_MPSV_2020_fin.pdf
17. NSPCC Learning (2025). Effective multi-agency working and information sharing: Evidence snapshot. London. [online] [cit. 2026-09-10]. Available from: https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/2025/effective-multi-agency-working-information-sharing-evidence-snapshot
18. Palinkas LA, Horwitz SM, Green CA, Wisdom JP, Duan N, Hoagwood K (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. Adm Policy Mental Health Ment Health 42(5): 533–544. DOI: 10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y.
19. Pascoe KM, Waterhouse-Bradley B, McGinn T (2023). Social Workers' Experiences of Bureaucracy: A Systematic Synthesis of Qualitative Studies. Br J Soc Work 53(1): 513–533. DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bcac106.
20. Schrodt P (2026). Interparental conflict and parent–child triangulation: a meta-analytical review of children feeling caught between parents. Hum Commun Res 52(2): 77–89. DOI: 10.1093/hcr/hqaf018.
21. Sudland C (2020). Challenges and dilemmas working with high-conflict families in child protection casework. Child Fam Soc Work 25(2): 248–255. DOI: 10.1111/cfs.12680.

* **Corresponding author:** Petra Vašinová, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, České Budějovice, Czech Republic; e-mail: petra.vasinova@post.cz
http://doi.org/10.32725/jnss.2026.016

Submitted: 2026-06-07 • Accepted: 2026-10-07 • Prepublished online: 2026-10-08
J Nurs Soc Stud Public Health Rehabil 17/3–4: xxx–xxx • EISSN 1804-7181 • ISSN 1804-1868
© 2026 The Authors. Published by University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Czech Republic and International Society of Applied Preventive Medicine, Vienna, Austria
This is an open access article under the CC BY 4.0 license.