The study describes the recent history of child protection in Helsinki, Finland. A crucial issue for child protection is the attitude towards taking children into public custody, particularly in cases where the family is opposed to it. Taking children into custody implies a serious ethical dilemma: the role of the parents and the integrity of the family are infringed. This is the ungrateful task of the child protection authorities. The institution of child protection can be characterised as paradoxical in Western culture, because it was developed at the same time the core family took shape and withdrew into privacy.

The aim of my study is to uncover which genealogy we have in child protection, i.e. what the strata of history reveal about child protection in the recent past. The target of the study are those children who were clients with the Agency of the Child Protection of the City of Helsinki between 1953 and 1979. I selected conflict cases of the agenda of the delegation of the Agency. The dispute is described both diachronically and synchronically: how the definition of a reluctant case changed and how some particular cases came to be classified as reluctant. The number of the total client documents was 274 from which 61 cases were sampled. These were divided into five groups representing different practices or policies of child protection. One case from each group was selected for closer scrutiny. The analysis method complies with actantial and modal-theoretical studies made in semiotic sociology. In addition relevant background theories were used to understand the construction of social reality. The interpretative and theoretical frame of reference relies on a Foucauldian research tradition.

The analysis of the material led to the following chronological and thematic division: 1) In the 1950s the largest group of custody-taking without parental consent were the children of mothers with mental problems. Placements into care implied that both mother and child were put under custody. 2) Such cases are included, too, where the child protection authority’s suggestion for custody was rejected. Many such cases were in borderline between punishment and battering. 3) In the 1960s, the practices of child protection were debated intensively in public. Single child protection cases fuelled the debate. The number of taking into custody decreased. 4) Alcohol abuse among women became a problem for the child protection authorities in the late 1960s. Whilst taking into custody without parental consent was shunned by the authorities, the situation of the children deteriorated. 5) In the early 1970s there was much debate when children taken into custody with parental consent were supposed to be sent back home again.

A historical trend emerged where taking into custody without parental consent constantly gave way to other methods of child protection. This was made possible by the expanding systems of the emerging welfare state. In the 1960s, the discursive formation of child protection, which included discourses from both social work itself and from psychiatry and law, broke down in all these three parts. The discourse of civil rights and care that child protection had embodied had to give way to concepts and strategies of family rights. From references to heavy psychiatry a shift was made towards a softer therapeutic and psycho-social approach. The child protection authorities did not quite master the situation, and this phase was characterised by anomaly and a farewell to custody-taking without parental consent, for a while. The ontological truth and epistemological certainty that had relied on a rational and objective ideal of knowledge had been shipwrecked. The change that took place in the 1960s was above all a change in the systems of truth of child protection and in the conceptions that had led to the child protection policies of that day.