



## Brief

# “Just as usual.” Cooperation between parents and kindergarten in a context of parental illness and death

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In this article, we direct our attention towards kindergarten teachers' cooperation with parents when a parent is severely ill and dying of a somatic disease. Previous bereavement research has suggested kindergarten teachers' support to bereaved children may compensate for parents' lacking resources to support their children, due to their own bereavement processes. We go further and suggest that kindergarten teachers' support is important, regardless of parents' functioning, because bereaved children spend their everyday life in the kindergarten. In Nordic countries, most children attend kindergarten from the age of 1–2 years old, and the cooperation between parents and kindergarten teachers is important to link the *chain of care* (Andenæs, 2011). In this article, we analyse kindergarten teachers' negotiation of the *contract of cooperation* with parents in the Norwegian kindergarten. By “contract of cooperation” we mean the rights, duties, and expectations that are taken for granted as background for cooperation and dialogue between kindergarten teachers and parents (Hundeide, 2003). Empirically, the results presentation derives from kindergarten teachers' (n = 18) subjective accounts of cooperation with parents when a mother or father is severely ill and dying of a somatic disease, collected through life form interviews, as part of a Ph.D.-study about professional encounters with young children experiencing parental death. A main finding is that the kindergarten teachers tend to keep the contract of cooperation “just as usual,” remaining parental illness and death as illegitimate topics within the kindergarten context. The results are presented as three characteristics of how the

kindergarten teachers negotiate the contract of cooperation: “Changed premises on old contract,” “Negotiation through formal cooperation,” and “People in-between.” We suggest that these characteristics must be understood as tied to the historical and cultural conditions of the Nordic kindergarten tradition and welfare state. Lacking legitimacy of kindergarten teachers to handle illness and death within the kindergarten context have consequences for the care for the children. We conclude that the responsibility to initiate renegotiation of the contract of cooperation must be placed with the kindergarten and not the parents. Further, we suggest that bereavement support and cooperation between parents and kindergarten during illness must be considered a responsibility of the kindergarten. Hence, the kindergartens’ bereavement response plans must include proactive, early support to families by negotiation of the contract of cooperation in formal meetings.

**Keywords:** *severe illness; cooperation between parents and kindergarten; chain of care; bereavement support*