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### Group work in progress

*Exploring ways to build a positive group climate in residential care for 4-15 year old children*

Strijbosch, E.L.L.

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# 6

## Building a Positive Group Climate Together: How Monitoring Instruments are Part of an Improvement Process in Residential Care for Children

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## **ABSTRACT**

A part of working on qualitatively good residential care is to monitor the group climate and act on the feedback from residents. The present study describes how two youth care organizations in the Netherlands implemented child-report group climate monitoring instruments (GCIC 4-8 and 8-15) as part of the broader 'You Matter!' project (in which  $N = 15$  teams, and  $N = 274$  children participated), and aims to answer the question how these monitoring instruments can help to improve group climate when routinely embedded in daily care. The results indicated that, in the age group 8-15 ( $n = 171$ ), negative group climate aspects diminished over two years using feedback from the children. Evaluating the broader 'You Matter' project, it appears to be worthwhile to invest in the monitoring of group climate. According to the interviewed group workers ( $N = 5$ ), group climate improvements were instigated most when the feedback was discussed soon after the measurement, and when teams were facilitated to reflect together and kept working on their shared vision. Trends in children's answers on the open-ended questions of the monitoring instrument provided further important information on how to stay focused on creating a safe and positive context for vulnerable children in residential care.

## INTRODUCTION

Children who cannot live with their parents, often for reasons of safety, can be placed in residential care. This type of care can be considered as a last resort, but also as an important manner to intervene when this is strongly needed (Anglin & Knorth, 2004; Whittaker et al., 2016). Residential treatment centers for children and youth serve a very vulnerable population with a wide range of needs (James, 2010; Smith, Duffee, Steinke, Huang, & Larkin, 2008). There should be unceasing attention for the quality of this most complex care form in order to strengthen the quality of life for the children involved (Jozefiak & Sønnichsen Kayed, 2015). Internationally, there is a search for models of care appropriate to meet the needs of these vulnerable children (Courtney & Iwaniec, 2009).

Recently, an international work group for therapeutic residential care published a consensus statement (Whittaker et al., 2016), in which they formulated the following definition in order to establish a more common language in the residential care sector: "Therapeutic Residential Care involves the planful use of a purposefully constructed, multi-dimensional living environment designed to enhance or provide treatment, education, socialization, support and protection to children and youth with identified mental health or behavioral needs in partnership with their families and in collaboration with a full spectrum of community-based formal and informal helping resources".

In line with the consensus statement, and a growing number of empirical studies showing that residential group climate significantly affects youth outcomes (for example, see Pinchover & Attar-Schwartz, 2014; Souverein, Van der Helm, & Stams, 2013; Van den Tillaart, Eltink, Stams, Van der Helm, & Wissink, 2018), it is regarded to be important for group workers to actively invest in a positive group climate; thus to pay attention to "the quality of the social and physical environment in terms of the provision of sufficient and necessary conditions for physical and mental health, well-being, contact and personal growth of the children, with respect for their human dignity and human rights as well as their personal autonomy, and aimed at recovery and successful participation in society" (Stams & Van der Helm, 2017).

Several authors have stated that there are two important elements required to support staff to work on a therapeutic group climate: 1) interventions and training at the team level, and 2) an appropriate monitoring system (Bastiaanssen et al., 2014; Nunno, Holden, & Leidy, 2003). The present study focuses on the second element, and aims to answer the following question: how can group climate monitoring instruments help to improve group climate aspects when routinely embedded in daily residential care for children aged 4-8 and 8-15 years? While several instruments for different age groups have been developed to monitor client perceptions of group climate aspects (Tonkin, 2015; Van der Helm, Stams, & Van der Laan, 2011; Strijbosch, et al., 2014a; Strijbosch, Van der Helm, Stams, & Wissink, 2017), less is known about their application so far.

Describing good practices and challenges in building a positive group climate while using monitoring instruments and the resulting feedback will ultimately contribute to the development and evolution of appropriate care models for children in residential care (Stams & Van der Helm, 2017).

### **Effects of a positive group climate**

A growing body of research shows evidence for relations between group climate and other process variables, such as alliance, client motivation and treatment engagement (Johnson, Burlingame, Olsen, Davies, & Gleave, 2005; Long et al., 2011; Roest, Van der Helm, Strijbosch, Van Brandenburg, & Stams, 2014; Strijbosch, Stams, Wissink, Van der Helm, & Roest, in press). In addition, group climate appears to be related to care outcomes. In fairly recent studies a more positively perceived social climate was associated with less runaway behavior (Attar-Schwartz, 2013), less externalizing problems (Gross et al., 2015) and less aggression (Ros, Van der Helm, Wissink, Stams, & Schaftenaar, 2013; Van den Tillaart et al., 2018). In addition, it was associated with less adjustment problems (Eltink, Van der Helm, Wissink, & Stams, 2015; Pinchover & Attar-Schwartz, 2014), better coping (Van der Helm, Beunk, Stams, & Van der Laan, 2014), and increased empathy development of youngsters (Heynen, Van der Helm, Cima, Stams, & Korebrits, 2017).

These studies indicate that the causes for certain problematic behaviors, such as aggression, may not only be found in the characteristics and history of the child, as the behaviors can also be affected by the context in which the child lives. Thus, previous results show that how children experience their stay in the residential treatment setting is related to their development and wellbeing.

### **How to measure group climate**

Improving group climate, which in turn is expected to enhance good outcomes, starts with the measurement of it. In the past decades, several instruments have been developed to measure group climate, or broader, social climate (for an overview, see Tonkin, 2015). Most instruments have been developed for use with adults and/or adolescents; until recently there were no instruments available for children. Based on the Prison Group Climate Instrument (Van der Helm et al., 2011), valid and reliable (brief) instruments were developed for youth aged 8-15 years (GCIC 8-15; Strijbosch et al., 2014a); and for children between 4-8 years (GCIC 4-8; Strijbosch et al., 2017) assessing positive (or 'open') climate and negative (or 'closed') climate. The first dimension refers to the support of group workers and possibilities for autonomy and growth. The second dimension refers to negative group atmosphere and interactions.

The GCIC instruments (for 4-8 and 8-15 years) have been applied in several institutions in the Netherlands and in other countries (Levrouw, Roose, Van der Helm, Strijbosch, &

Vandervelde, 2018). The instruments appear to be suitable for use on a regular basis and can help group workers to better understand the dynamics in their group and enable them to make continuous improvements as a team based on information provided by the children (Strijbosch et al., 2014a, 2017).

### How to improve group climate

It is thought that many factors in the living/treatment environment can well be influenced in order to make improvements in how children perceive group climate. The team of group workers seems to be a key in achieving these improvements. Besides offering interventions and training programs to the teams, an appropriate monitoring system is considered to be an important first step for group workers in order to improve group climate (Bastiaanssen et al., 2014; Nunno et al., 2003).

A growing body of research is available on Routine *Outcome* Monitoring (ROM) in mental health care. ROM refers to regular measurements of clients' progress in clinical practice aiming to evaluate and, if necessary, adapt treatment in order to improve the functioning and reduce the symptomatology of the target group (Brann, Coleman, & Luk, 2001; Hall et al., 2014; Van Sonsbeek, Hutschemaekers, Veerman, & Tiemens, 2014). Support for the potential value of ROM is found in meta-analytic studies (Gondek, Edbrooke-Childs, Fink, Deighton, & Wolpert, 2016; Lambert & Shimokawa, 2011), although the validity of these outcomes has been challenged, especially in the context of using ROM data for benchmarking (Hafkenscheid & Van Os, 2018).

It is increasingly being argued that the monitoring of *outcomes* should be combined with the monitoring of *processes* (Davies & Crombie, 1995; Holden et al., 2010; Siebum, Pijl, & De Wolf, 2015). Indicators for process quality could be objective facts, such as the 'presence of treatment plans' (Siebum et al., 2015), or subjective client satisfaction, and alliance and collaboration factors (Hafkenscheid, 2010). The subjective indicators have received the most attention in literature, and the monitoring of these aspects will, in the present study, be referred to as Routine *Process* Monitoring (RPM). The Session Rating Scale (Miller & Duncan, 2004) is an example of a broadly used monitoring instrument, filled out after each treatment session, meant to elicit positive or negative feedback of the client that can be discussed, which offers possibilities to improve the therapeutic alliance.

Thus, the amount of studies on monitoring *process* variables at the *individual* (client system) level is also increasing. However, studies of RPM at a *group* level are still scarce (Nunno et al, 2003; Stams & Van der Helm, 2017). Group climate aspects can be seen as key process variables for children in youth care (Attar-Schwartz, 2009), and are suitable to include in a RPM cycle. Assessing and monitoring these process aspects possibly offers a way forward to the further development of quality measures and making

improvements accordingly in this care sector (Puszka et al., 2015). In recent research on residential care for children, the six-month trends in individual children's scores on positive and negative group climate were studied (Strijbosch et al., 2018). A next question is how the group climate scores develop over a longer period of time at the group level, and which aspects are perceived to play an important role herein according to both children and group workers, while they are working together on improvements in group climate.

### **Participation of children**

It is a child's right (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) to be involved when decisions are made about their lives. Therefore, working on group climate in residential youth care can and should not be done without the children whom it concerns. A residential living/treatment group with children and the team of group workers can be considered a 'therapeutic community', in which there is a sense of collective responsibility, democracy, communality and empowerment, and a shared aim to breed a culture of helping oneself and each other within a therapeutic framework (Campling, 1999; Eisler, 2000).

Many studies on youth participation in residential care have confirmed that children and young people wish to have a say in the decisions that are made about their lives and living environment; and the authors have stated that youth participation should become a standard part of the formal group processes (Bessell & Gal, 2009; Cashmore, 2002; Gal, 2017; Jamieson, 2017). However, especially with younger children, it is considered a challenge to grant them an age-adequate degree of influence (Southwell & Fraser, 2010; Ten Brummelaar, 2016). Southwell and Fraser (2010) found in their study that children under the age of 15 were less satisfied than older respondents with regard to several aspects, including feeling safe, getting along with their caregivers, having someone to talk to when they were worried, and having a say in what happens to them.

One of the reasons for child participation being a challenge is that professionals are greatly influenced by the laws and regulations that dictate the procedures they have to follow, their budgets, and their workload (Gal, 2017). In other words, the management of residential treatment groups by group workers is very intensive, and the structure in which they operate is for a great deal externally determined. If continuous evaluation and monitoring of group climate is not embedded in the daily process, group workers may be less aware of the importance of reflecting with (also the younger) children on how they experience their living situation (Levrrouw et al., 2018), and the treatment/living group may risk becoming a 'closed system' (Pinker, 2018).

## **Towards an approach to improve group climate together with children**

Based on the afore-mentioned previous findings and literature, the 'You Matter!' project was developed (Strijbosch et al., 2014b), which entails an approach where residential treatment teams providing care to 4-15 year old children used (apart from training, and inter- and supervision) a monitoring system in which children's perceptions played a central role. The project focused on implementing a Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle in two residential youth care organizations in order to embed working on a positive group climate in daily processes (see Method section for more information). The project could be considered as a Routine Process Monitoring project, as group process variables were measured and monitored on a regular basis (every six months).

### **Present study**

The present study addresses the question how group climate monitoring instruments can be part of an improvement process in residential care for 4-15 year old children. The employment of these instruments can, in our view, only be regarded from a broader perspective: in this case this was the broader 'You Matter!' project, which focused on improving group climate in residential care for children. The main research question was divided into three sub-questions. The first question was how group climate scores had developed over two years' time, during which the monitoring instruments and the resulting feedback were used every six months. Second, which lessons did group worker teams learn from the broader 'You Matter!' project (in which the instruments were embedded)? Finally, in order to give direction to future research and practice in attaining a positive group climate, the third question was which specific themes were mentioned most by children when they were asked about their group climate perception.

Our expectation was that the child-rated group climate scores at the group level would improve over the course of time. We did not formulate specific hypotheses with regard to the other two research questions, because we wanted to maintain an open view in order to learn more about where the most important possibilities were to be found for enhancing group climate in institutions providing residential care to children and youth. This study is aimed to be a step forward in employing Routine Process Monitoring in residential youth care.

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

In total,  $N = 15$  teams, and  $N = 274$  children of two youth care organizations in the Netherlands participated in the 'You Matter!' project from 2012 to 2015 (see Procedure for more information). A total of  $n = 103$  children fell in the age group 4-8 years (41%

participated at one measurement occasion and 59% at two or more occasions) and  $n = 171$  children in fell in the age group 8-15 years (47% participated at one measurement occasion and 53% at two or more occasions). Of the 8-15 year olds, 42% answered open-ended questions (besides giving scores to the group climate topics) at least at one measurement occasion. After the project had ended,  $N = 5$  group workers from five different teams were interviewed about their experiences during the project.

## **Procedure**

The broader 'You Matter!' project (in which the measurements were embedded; see Figure 1 for an overview) was aimed at establishing a Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle in order to continuously work on a positive group climate. The steps in the procedure are described further below.

### ***Plan-Do***

All the teams started off together with a (guided) introductory meeting where the basic principles of the project were discussed, hereby reflecting on practice- and evidence-based insights on what should be offered to youths in residential group care, and young children in particular (Jongepier, Struijk, and Van der Helm, 2010; Riksen-Walraven, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2000). In short, the basic principles relate to providing physical and emotional security, structure and clear boundaries, as well as several kinds of opportunities for personal development and growth. Based on a shared vision, each team formulated their own action plan with concrete actions that were thought to result in an improved group climate in the months to come. Table 1 shows some examples of actions that teams included in their action plans, categorized following the above-mentioned basic principles.

Along the way, the teams constructed (often together with the children in their group) several tools in line with their action plans. For example, they made 'thermometers' or 'traffic lights' together to rate the group atmosphere during daily or weekly group meetings, and teams changed standard formats for team meetings and case evaluations in which they made the principles for an open group climate leading. In the light of maintaining a solid professional base for the teams, e.g. with regard to pedagogical skills and trauma-sensitive working, team training courses and coaching were available for professionals in the organization's education programme.

### ***Check-Act***

Every six months the GCIC (4-8/8-15) questionnaires were administered to monitor the children's perceived group climate. In addition, five open-ended questions were asked that focused on key themes of group climate. That is, children in the age of 8-15 (so

not the younger children) were asked how they felt about 1) the help of group workers, 2) what they learned in the care institution, 3) the group atmosphere, 4) honesty in the group and 5) the group rules. Next, the researchers provided the children's feedback to the teams via easy to comprehend figures comprised in 'factsheets' within four weeks after the measurement (to optimize the chances that the figures would still be representative). This feedback was then discussed in team meetings and with the children, and thereby used every time to evaluate and adjust the team action plan.

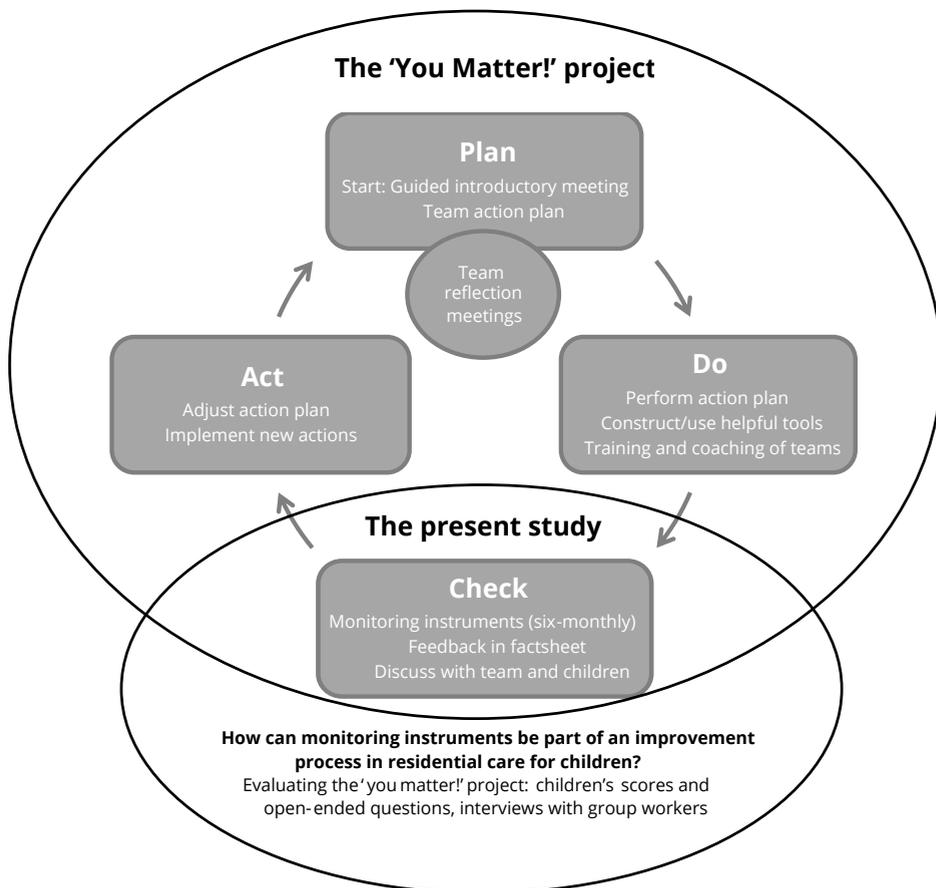
**Table 1.** Examples of actions in the 'You Matter!' project

<b>Basic principles</b> (Based on: Deci & Ryan, 2000; Jongepier, Struijk, & Van der Helm, 2010; Riksen-Walraven, 2004)	<b>Examples of actions</b>
Provide children with physical and emotional security and emotional support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We spend more time in the group and less time in our office.</li> <li>- We give more 1-to-1 attention to our 'mentor children'</li> </ul>
Provide information on the child's level of understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We pay more attention to how children experience (e.g.) their therapies, and provide more explanation if needed</li> </ul>
Provide children with structure and clear boundaries, important to learn about values and norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We evaluate conflicts and aggressive incidents in a constructive way together with the children who were involved.</li> </ul>
Stimulate children's personal development including a sense of autonomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We give more compliments about what the children have done or tried well.</li> <li>- We give children a task in keeping the living room cosy.</li> <li>- We place a 'letter box' for good ideas in the group.</li> </ul>
Support positive interactions between the children, helping them to enhance social skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We organize more fun activities together with the children.</li> <li>- We let children rate the group atmosphere during daily or weekly group meetings and discuss together how to improve it.</li> </ul>
Stimulate and support interactions between the child and its parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- We e-mail parents with updates regarding their child's development.</li> <li>- We organize group dinners with parents.</li> </ul>

### **Reflection with other teams during the project**

Also, at least once and sometimes two times a year, a joint meeting was organized for all the teams participating in the project. Beforehand, a delegation of care professionals and researchers decided on a common theme for the meeting. In these meetings, there was usually an inspiring external speaker; a researcher or an expert from another youth care organization. Also, the overall development in the scores over time was presented to the teams by the organization's researcher. In the second part, the teams presented how they had been working on group climate in the previous period. They showed each other which tools they had invented together with the children. Also, they told

each other how they had spoken about the results of the group climate measurements with the children in the group, what they had discovered by doing that, and how they subsequently formulated actions with the children.



**Figure 1.** The present study in relation to the 'You Matter!' project

### **Evaluating the project**

In order to answer our research question how group climate monitoring instruments can be part of an improvement process in residential care for 4-15 year old children, the 'You Matter!' project was evaluated. First, the mean GCIC scores per group, and the overall mean scores (all groups added up) provided insight into the general development of group climate aspects as perceived by the children over time. To give a reliable overview, it was not possible to take every group's scores into account: two groups had children in both the 4-8 and 8-15 age groups, and not enough (three or

more) respondents in the same age group at five (or more) subsequent measurement occasions, so finally the scores of 13 out of 15 groups were used to provide an overview of the quantitative outcomes.

Next, we wanted to evaluate the broader project (including the monitoring measurements) with group workers. Five group workers representing five different teams were approached for an interview, and they were all willing to cooperate. The respondents were all group workers who had extra coordinating tasks besides their pedagogical work with the children. Given the commonalities in their answers, it did not seem to be necessary to approach more group workers after this first interview round. The semi-structured interviews evolved around three main questions: 1) 'How did you experience working on group climate via a Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle?', 2) 'What lessons have you learnt from this project?' and 3) 'What would you recommend to other teams that are just starting to work in this way?'. The interviews took place at an office on the work location of the group workers, and had a duration of 45 minutes on average.

At last, the children's answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed in order to explore the topics they seemed to consider most important when one's aim is to work on a positive group climate, and to generate ideas for further inquiry. To enable this analysis, the text answers were first extracted from the SPSS database and reorganized in an Excel data file by team and measurement occasion.

## Data analyses

First, mean scores of children at the group level, and overall mean scores (the mean of 13 groups) of five measurement occasions with six-month intervals were used for visual inspection of possible trends over a period of two years that the institutions worked with the broader 'You Matter!' approach. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA's) with Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc tests were conducted in order to test the differences between the scores on the five measurements occasions for statistical significance. Unfortunately, it was not possible to conduct repeated measures analyses of variance, because there were many changes in the group composition between the measurement occasions; some children were still living in the group and others had left. Notably, only samples of adjacent measurement occasions did include small proportions of the same children.

Second, the group workers' answers were analyzed and organized following the three predefined questions/topics. Meaningful text fragments were identified and coded by topic. Next, they were compared to each other in the axial coding phase (Boeije, 2005). Some were repositioned under a different question/ topic. The input was summarized, and individual quotes were cited for comprehension.

Third, the children's answers (which were only available from the age group 8-15) on the five open-ended questions were analyzed also using the analysis method of

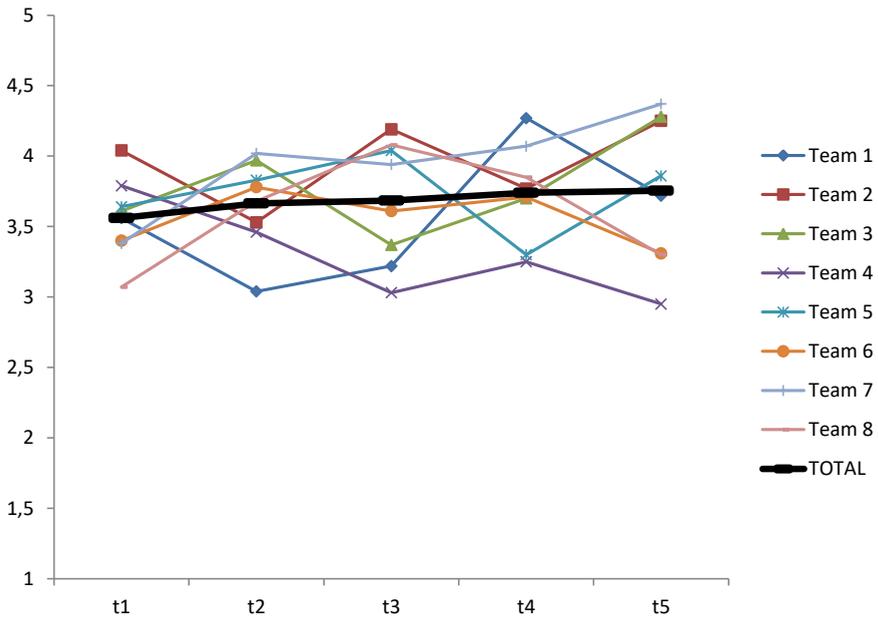
Boeije (2005). All the answers, organized by team and measurement occasion, were read by the first author, while analyzing the most meaningful text fragments within the five predefined main topics. Patterns were distilled from the answers that were most prevalent. In order to enhance objectivity, the raw data and extracted patterns were discussed and fine-tuned with a colleague researcher. There was also attention for similarities and contrasts within groups. Individual responses (quotes) were marked and cited for comprehension.

## RESULTS

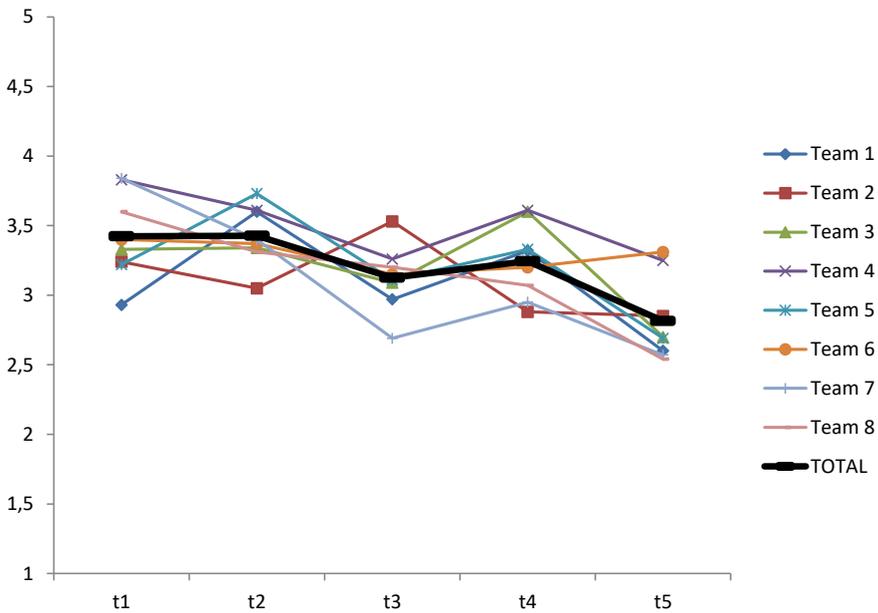
### Changes in child-rated group climate over time

The first question to be answered was whether there were positive changes over time in children's perception of group climate during the course of the broader 'You Matter!' project in which a routine process monitoring cycle was embedded. Figures 2 and 3 show the development in these scores over time for the 8-15 age group. In almost every group, there were rather large fluctuations in the mean scores over time. The overall mean score (the mean of all the group scores: 'Total' -black- line in the figures) seems to show small changes in the expected positive direction, but these were non-significant according to the One-Way ANOVA:  $F(4, 229) = .363, p = .835$ . The overall mean score on 'negative climate' did drop significantly over time:  $F(4, 229) = 5.176, p < .01$ , from  $M = 3.45$  ( $SD = .62$ ) at the first measurement occasion to  $M = 2.81$  ( $SD = .88$ ) two years later. The Student-Newman-Keuls post-hoc test indicated that the change in scores was also significant between measurement occasions four and five:  $F(1, 88) = 7.011, p < .05$ . This result implies that negative climate aspects diminished over the course of time according to the perceptions of the children, and especially between the last two measurement occasions.

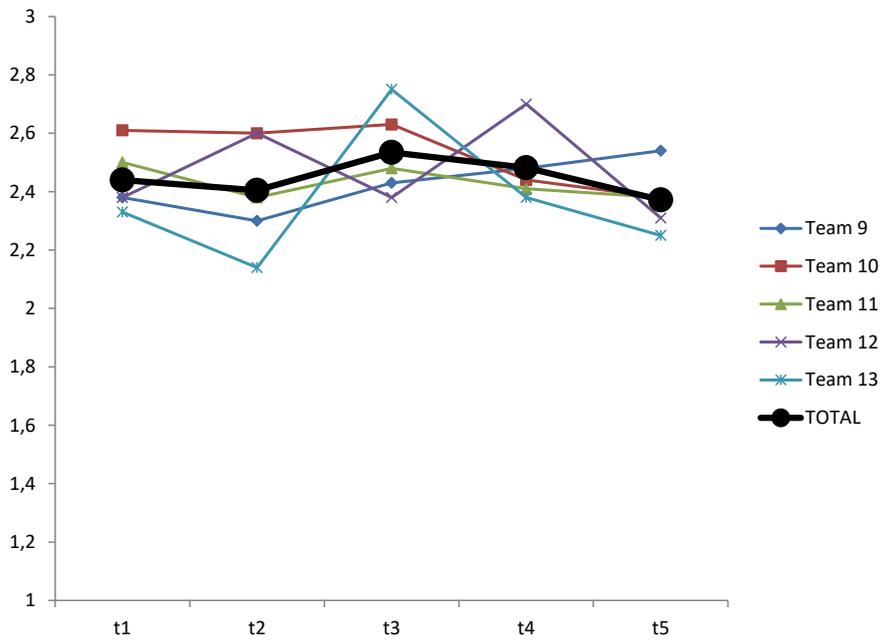
Figures 4 and 5 show, respectively, the development in the positive and negative group climate scores for the 4-8 age group. Inspecting the overall mean scores of the 4-8 year old children, there were only fluctuations and no clear trends over two years' time. According to the One-Way ANOVA, there were no significant differences between the scores of the five measurement occasions on 'positive climate' ( $F(4, 104) = .234, p = .919$ ) and 'negative climate' ( $F(4, 104) = .915, p = .458$ ).



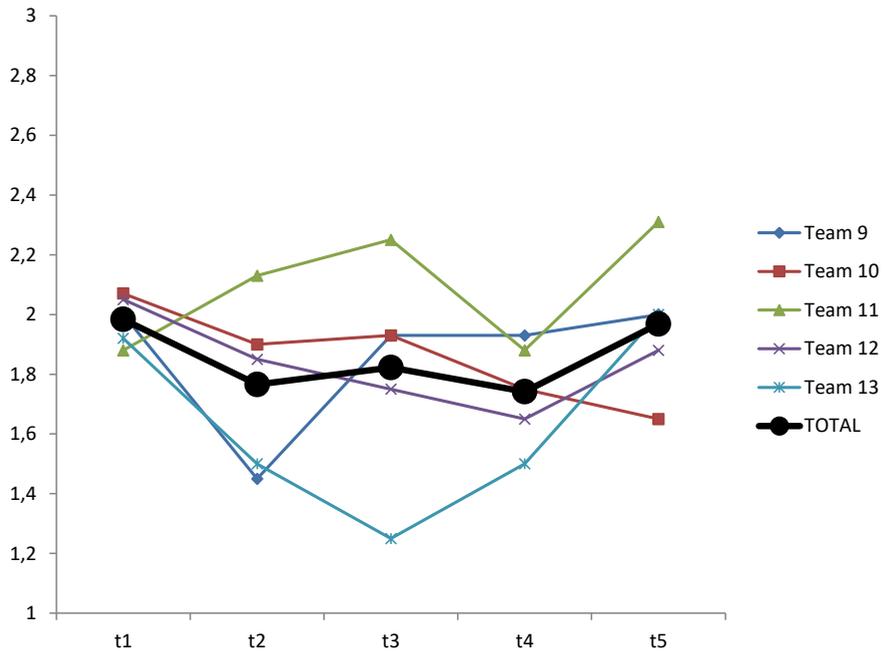
**Figure 2.** Mean scores on 'positive climate', development over two years, age 8-15.



**Figure 3.** Mean scores on 'negative climate', development over two years, age 8-15.



**Figure 4.** Mean scores on 'positive climate', development over two years, age 4-8.



**Figure 5.** Mean scores on 'negative climate', development over two years, age 4-8.

## Results of the analysis of the answers of the group workers during the interviews

The second research question to be answered was what lessons group workers had learnt from the broader project (including the measurements and the resulting feedback). In the text below, we summarize the trends in their experiences, lessons learnt, and recommendations for other teams and researchers.

### ***Experiences: It is good to ask children for feedback about group climate, but not always easy to convert this into actions and keep up the plan together as a team***

The analyses of the interview data showed that all interviewed group workers saw advantages in the feedback cycle that was embedded within the broader project. They stated that it gave children the chance to voice how they felt about the group climate even if they did not feel like saying it to group workers directly. All interviewed group workers also indicated that they wanted to take the children's feedback into account when they reflected on their pedagogical work (e.g., 'It is good to check whether you are still doing the right things', 'Once we have received the factsheet we discuss it in the team as soon as possible').

The results also indicated that it was not always easy to convert the feedback into actions. First, it was noted by the interviewed group workers that the feedback was sometimes already outdated when it was being discussed (e.g., 'If it takes a month before the factsheet is scheduled on the agenda of the team meeting, there may have been fundamental changes in the group already, which makes the outcomes less representative'). Next, the group workers indicated that it took patience and time to actually make and evaluate plans together (e.g., 'It is hard to find the time to reflect together with all team members and make plans; there are less team meetings, because of budget cuts and the new Working Hours Act', 'We cannot always follow the action plan due to a lack of time').

Most of the interviewed group workers stressed the importance of shared goals and efforts in the team when working on a positive group climate, and the fact that this was sometimes lacking (e.g., 'Not every change is easy when colleagues are used to a certain way of working', 'People find it good, but also confronting to reflect together as a team and give and/or receive feedback', 'Not everyone finds it important to use the feedback explicitly in the action planning; it feels like something extra while they are very busy already').

The interviewed group workers indicated that it was a great challenge to keep up the planned actions and reflection over time, and achieve actual changes ('We want to keep up the action plans, but this is not always easy, with new children coming into the group, changing personnel and problem behavior becoming more extreme. There are

just very many situations in which you have to react instantly and you do not have the time or calm to reflect’).

Despite the above, the analyses of the interview data also indicated that all teams managed to keep working on ways to strengthen a positive group climate. As examples of ‘good practices’ some of the interviewed group workers mentioned: ‘We introduced the child of the week’, ‘We have implemented actions for more parent participation’, ‘We try to build in reflection moments during the changing of the shifts’, and ‘We are going to organize meetings every month around certain themes’.

***Lessons learnt: The children’s feedback is valuable, reflection should be organized under certain preconditions, inspiration can be found within and outside the team***

The analysis of the interview data concerning the question which lessons the interviewed group workers learnt during the broader project (including the monitoring measurements) showed, first of all, that most of the interviewed group workers were positively surprised by the children (e.g., ‘Some children can put their feelings or perceptions very well into words’).

The group workers all indicated that they had learnt how important it was to organize moments for feedback and reflection at both the individual and group level (e.g., ‘This method makes us reflect more on group climate, not only during team meetings, but every time this is necessary due to specific signals or incidents’). According to most of the interviewed group workers, this sometimes meant that one had to work on the right preconditions first (e.g., ‘The most important precondition for reflection is that the team is stable’, ‘We have agreed as a team that we should express ourselves earlier when something is wrong; now we wait too long and that leads to gossiping sometimes and, therefore, feelings of unsafety’, ‘We can achieve more when several colleagues feel responsible for this, and if we divide the tasks’). Next, the interviewed group workers remarked that they had to choose a focus with the team (e.g., ‘Scores that differ between children and group workers are interesting to discuss’) and formulate attainable goals (e.g., ‘We manage to achieve our goals around group climate, as long as we do not make them sky high’).

Finally, the group workers said that inspiration to move on in their process could be sought within, but also outside of the own team of group workers (e.g., ‘In interpreting and applying the results we need support from a behavioral scientist’, ‘The reflection meetings with other teams are important, because they provide us with new ideas and a fresh look at things’).

***Recommendations: Keep the group climate topics on the agenda, make people more responsible, formulate actions together with the children, and stay inspired***

The analysis of the interviews showed that the interviewed group workers recommended to make one or two team members responsible to let the group climate themes recur on the agenda. Also, two group workers suggested it could be a good idea to make it obligatory to address the results of the routine process monitoring instruments, in the presence of and/or with support of a researcher (e.g., 'It is good that there is an external impulse to stay aware about the themes around group climate'). Most of the interviewed group workers mentioned though that, in the end, every team member should feel responsible to keep working on the common goals and actions, and to stimulate this, tasks may be divided.

The group workers recommended to regularly plan meetings with the children, discuss the outcomes with them, and formulate actions together; then children know and experience that their feedback is taken seriously. It was even suggested by the interviewed group workers that it would be good to measure more frequently than every six months. Finally, the group workers emphasized the importance of learning with and from each other (e.g., 'Besides the big reflection meetings, maybe discussions with other teams and/or organizations in smaller groups focused on a specific theme could be organized').

**Exploring children's answers to the open-ended questions**

The final research question to be answered before we discuss all the results, was which specific themes children found important in attaining a positive group climate. Exploring children's answers on how they felt about 1) the help of group workers, 2) what they learned in the care institution, 3) the group atmosphere, 4) honesty in the group and 5) the group rules, provided us with first insights. In general, we found that many of the children (in the 8-15 age group) who participated in this study gave well thought-out answers to the open-ended questions. The most prevalent themes in their answers are summarized below.

***The help of the group workers: Many children got help when they needed it, but group workers sometimes had too little time to help everyone***

Many children stated that they got help and attention from group workers when they needed it (e.g., 'They are very helpful and kind', 'I can always count on them', 'They help you when you find something difficult', 'They help you when you are in a fight'). Some children mentioned the support they received with daily things such as eating, going to bed and tidying their room, or that group workers did their best to make the living space cozy. Interestingly, how the help was experienced by the children could

differ greatly within one group. Some children said they got much help and group workers were always there for them, whereas others from the same group said (at the same measurement occasion) that they felt ignored, misunderstood, or that they got punished too quickly for what they did (e.g., 'Sometimes it feels as if they are not listening to me', 'I don't always like it because they ignore us and don't let us make our points').

A recurring theme was that there was always too little time, and that the availability of two group workers was often not enough. So help and attention were not always available at the right moments (e.g., 'When I ask for help they go to others first, and once they come to me I am already angry and sent to my room'). Children from several groups noted that more help and attention went out to the younger children (e.g., 'Usually only the little ones get help'), or the children who were angry or aggressive. Also, according to several children, there were differences between the group workers (e.g., 'Well, some group workers do it right, and some do it wrong', 'With some group workers I can talk better than with others').

Critical moments when the help could be improved were when children were angry (e.g., 'Sometimes I don't even get the chance to explain what happened', 'They help me with everything, but sometimes they should act differently, when there are conflicts in the group').

***What you learn in the institution: Most children felt they learned something, but others did not know what they could learn, or did not understand why they had to live in a group***

The answers to the second open question indicated that most children felt they learned something (e.g., 'You learn what you need here', 'I learn more than I used to, it is going much better with me now'). Things children often mentioned to have learnt in the institution were: managing their anger, saying things differently, behaving better, not being rude/bold, gaining more self-confidence, making friends, and playing together. And also: cleaning up their bedroom, cooking, eating different things, becoming more autonomic. Some showed to be proud of what they had learnt (e.g., 'I have learnt a lot here, I can help others now').

Several children stated that they had to learn things in order to be allowed to live at home again (e.g., 'I have to learn to stop my bad behavior so I can go home again', 'I have learnt enough to go home soon'). Other children wrote down they thought it was good for them to live in the group, but that they did not find it easy (e.g., 'You learn things you have to get used to at first', or 'You learn a lot but sometimes it is difficult'). And then there were also children whose answers indicated that they did not know what they could learn (e.g., 'I am not here to learn', 'I play a lot but don't know whether I learn

something; 'You don't learn here, you just live here; 'I don't learn something, I only talk to the group workers'). Or they did not see why they had to live in the group at all (e.g., 'What I learn here, I can learn at home as well; 'I teach myself things; or 'My parents have to learn something').

Sometimes the children differentiated between what they had learnt from the other children and from group workers (e.g., 'You learn bad things from the other children and good things from group workers; 'When you talk about things here with group workers, you learn faster').

***The group atmosphere: Children found that there were ups and downs, and the group atmosphere could change very quickly***

About one quarter of the answers to the question how children felt about the group atmosphere were merely positive (e.g., 'The children get along very well'), but the main answer children gave was that there were ups and downs, and that the group atmosphere could change very quickly (e.g., 'It changes a lot, with new children entering the group; 'Sometimes the atmosphere turns around all of a sudden; 'It can be super fun, but also super bad'). Reasons that the children mentioned for the atmosphere not being so good were: many angry kids, too crowded and a lot of stress, fighting, scolding, bullying, reacting too much to each other, irritations, (sometimes) too many fixations, and boredom. In some groups, children noted the atmosphere could be negatively influenced by one child (e.g., 'All kids are nice, only one child is scolding a lot').

Some suggestions were brought up by the children to make improvements, such as 'The atmosphere is better when group workers pay better attention to what happens; or 'Group workers should be less strict'. Some children mentioned how the group atmosphere was determined by how the house looked (e.g., 'Our house is quite cozy; or 'It looks nicer at the house next door'). Reasons for a good atmosphere that were mentioned by the children were: small groups where children felt they had friends, when group workers provided quick solutions to problems, and when the group did fun things.

***Honesty in the group: Children experienced that they could not trust everyone, and generally trusted group workers better than the other children***

Many children said that other children in their group were not honest: they mentioned stealing, lying, gossiping, and not telling everything. Some children also admitted that they were not always honest themselves (e.g., 'I am not always honest, but I want to learn to improve this'). Some children said that they had to fight the dishonesty ('Some children are not to be trusted; they want to drag me into something that is wrong'). Most children trusted the group workers better than they trusted the

children (e.g., 'Group workers are very open and tell me everything I need to know; I am not sure about the children'). When honesty was understood as righteousness, some children mentioned broken promises (by staff), and situations such as 'I have to go to my room, while I have done nothing wrong'.

***Group rules: Children appreciated the rules, but also found that these should be adhered to better, or could be improved***

Finally, most children agreed with the fact that there were group rules (e.g., 'Sometimes it is annoying, but it is good that there are rules', 'Rules about not hurting each other are important', 'Some rules make children less stressed', 'It makes children listen better', 'The rules are strict, but we can learn from them'). Additionally, children of several groups stated that the rules should be adhered to more strictly: 'Often group workers do not follow the rules consequently', 'The rules change too often', 'Different group workers do not handle the rules the same way'.

However, the results also showed that children within the same group could feel very different about the rules ('The rules are not clear' versus 'The rules are very clear'; or 'The rules are too strict' versus 'The rules should be more strict'). Many children mentioned that the rules could be improved, and how: 'There are good ones, but there are also some very bad ones', 'I would like to have a say when rules are determined', 'The rule about staying in your room for thirty minutes is stupid, it makes me more stressed'.

To summarize, the group workers as well as the children who participated in the present study offered many valuable insights, which can be used while working on methods to enhance a positive group climate in residential care for children. These insights and their implications for future research and practice will be discussed further in the next section.

## **DISCUSSION**

To enhance outcomes for children in (therapeutic) residential care, it is more and more acknowledged that it is important to invest in a positive group climate (e.g., Attar-Schwartz, 2009; Heynen et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2005; Ros et al., 2013; Van der Helm et al., 2014; Whittaker et al., 2016), and several group climate monitoring instruments for different age groups have been developed to be able to monitor aspects of the climate in residential care (Strijbosch et al., 2014a, 2017; Tonkin, 2015; Van der Helm et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, studies that describe and evaluate how these monitoring instruments can help to improve group climate when embedded in daily residential care for children, are still scarce (Levrouw et al., 2018; Stams & Van der Helm, 2017). The present study describes how two youth care organizations in the Netherlands embedded group climate monitoring instruments in daily practice, as part of the larger 'You Matter!'

project. This project (in which  $N = 15$  teams, and  $N = 274$  children participated, in the age range 4-15), focused on establishing a Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle concerning group climate. Besides the implementation of monitoring instruments, it entailed the creation of team-specific action plans, and offering several team interventions in order to stimulate teams to influence children's perceptions of the group climate in a positive way. We examined the changes in group climate scores (as perceived by the children) over two years' time with six-monthly measurement occasions, the lessons learnt by group workers from the broader project, and the themes that were mentioned most by children when they were asked about their group climate perception. In the next paragraphs we will outline and discuss the conclusions per research question.

First, more than expected, fluctuations were found in the perceived group climate scores of the separate teams over time. It seems that separate group climate scores can vary just like the weather. This can be understood from the continuously changing dynamics as a result of, among other factors, changing shifts of group workers, changes in team and group composition, and external (pre)conditions (Souverein et al., 2013). On the other hand, and in line with the expectations, the overall long term statistics (the 'overall means' across all groups) indicated a more general climate change in the positive direction for the age group 8-15. Staying in the metaphor, real (climate) change may be the sum of very many small (weather) changes. In the 8-15 group, the decrease in negative climate aspects turned out to be significant, whereas the increase in positive climate aspects was not. This result can be regarded as encouraging, because decreasing negative aspects and experiences may overall have a stronger positive effect on the children's treatment outcomes than the (further) increase of positive climate aspects ('bad is stronger than good') (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). However, the result should be interpreted with caution because of the limited statistical power of the analysis.

We did not observe significant changes over time in the group climate scores of 4-8 year old children. Possibly, changes were less needed than with the older children because scores were already 'good enough' (ceiling effect). On the other hand, the result could be in line with findings in earlier research that with younger children it is a greater challenge to grant them an age-adequate degree of influence (Southwell & Fraser, 2010).

Second, important lessons were learnt from the broader 'You Matter!' project by interviewing group workers. The results of the analyses of the interview data indicated that the application of monitoring instruments brings along more awareness about the group climate, which is an important base for positive change in the long term (Ager et al., 2012; Nunno et al., 2003). It also poses challenges to the teams, as it is not always easy to translate the feedback into actions, and it takes patience and time to keep up planned actions together and achieve durable positive changes.

According to the interviewed group workers, improvements in the group climate can be instigated best when there is time to reflect together as a team, which is in line with other studies (Bastiaanssen et al., 2014; Souverein et al., 2013). This reflection refers, first, to working on basic preconditions in order to become and stay a stable team with a shared vision, where everyone can and will express themselves before tensions and problems get a chance to mount. Second, it refers to discussing (the effects of) actions that the team implemented together with the children in order to achieve and maintain a positive group climate. This information exchange may be necessary for teams to generate new energy in order to grow (Pinker, 2018)

Inspiration to keep moving forward in the process of building a positive group climate was found within the own team, in the often surprising answers of the children, and in the experiences of other teams and organizations. In addition, the interviewed group workers indicated that it worked well to make one or two team members responsible for keeping important group climate topics on the agenda, not wanting to change everything at the same time, and to make sure feedback was discussed before it was outdated.

We cannot conclude from the lessons learnt by group workers in the 'You Matter!' project (which included the employment of monitoring instruments) that the use of monitoring instruments alone caused positive changes, but it did seem to provide an appreciated basis to keep group climate on the agenda and stimulate actions to improve it. Thus, even though the utilization of the instruments could be further optimized, besides working with feedback at the *individual client* level, it seems worthwhile to invest in Routine Process Monitoring (RPM) focused on *group climate*.

Third, from our final analysis of the children's answers on several open-ended questions about 1) the help of group workers, 2) what they learned in the care institution, 3) the group atmosphere, 4) honesty in the group and 5) the group rules, we have learnt which specific themes they found to be most important in order to attain a positive group climate. Overall, we found that many of the children (8-15 years) who participated in this study were able to provide well thought-out answers to the open-ended questions. Furthermore, we may conclude from the analysis of the responses that many children got support and attention from group workers when they needed it. Most children felt that they learned something. Also many children appreciated the structure and rules of the group, and had quite strong ideas about good and bad rules, which seems to suggest they wished to be heard in the determination of these rules (Ten Brummelaar, 2016).

Nonetheless, it also appeared from the analysis that children felt that there was not always help at the right moments (for example because the group workers did not have enough time to help everyone), which may have caused more outbursts than normal, as tension can build up rather quickly when children feel ignored, misunderstood or

unevenly treated (Brown, McCauley, Navalta, & Saxe, 2013; De Valk, Kuiper, Van der Helm, Maas, & Stams, 2016; Knorth, Klomp, Van den Bergh, & Noom, 2007). Children indicated that the atmosphere in the group could suddenly turn bad, as a result of (e.g.) aggression, bullying or boredom. They found that group workers could sometimes react differently to these incidents, and that one should adhere better to the rules. One could doubt to what extent children are still able to experience psychological relatedness, and develop their autonomy and competence (basic psychological needs in the Self-Determination Theory; Deci & Ryan, 2000) within environments that are described as unpredictable, and which lack continuity and stability of caregivers. A lack of a secure base could hamper children's stabilization and, thereby, it could hamper an important part of (trauma-sensitive) therapeutic residential care (Kisiel, Summersett-Ringgold, Weil, & McClelland, 2017; Whittaker et al., 2016).

Some children did not know what they could learn in the group, or did not understand why they had to live in an institution at all. This suggests better explanations could be provided by group workers to the children (Jongepier et al., 2010). Next, it appeared from the answers that children trusted group workers better than they trusted each other. According to the children, the group atmosphere was better with less children in one group, and when enough time and attention was spent on doing fun things.

The analysis of the children's answers in this study underlines the importance of giving children in residential care a clear voice and granting them to have proportional influence on their living environment using their feedback (Bessell & Gal, 2009; Cashmore, 2002; Gal, 2017; Jamieson, 2017; Southwell & Fraser, 2010; Ten Brummelaar, 2016), and of addressing the themes they find particularly important, such as trust, attention and recreation/relaxation.

### **Strengths and limitations of the study**

The main strength of this study was that it was one of the first to examine the employment of group climate monitoring instruments in residential child care, the associated changes in the scores over time, and the experiences of the children and group workers involved. It showed how group climate instruments can generate important insights to address in daily practice, building on appropriate models of care to meet the needs of a very vulnerable group of children.

There were also several limitations to this study, some of which are inherent to cross-sectional practice based research, which is performed within a complex reality where experimental studies are often not possible or considered to be non-ethical. First, because of the structure in the quantitative data (there had been many changes in the group composition between measurement occasions), we were not able to conduct repeated measure analyses of variance, which would have increased the statistical power of the analyses. Next, we do not know exactly what caused the changes over

time. If the monitoring instruments played an important part as was suggested in this study, we still cannot be sure whether the changes in the scores over time indicated actual improvements for the children, or were simply a result of children starting to score differently once they realized that the professionals were going to discuss the results (Hafkenscheid & Van Os, 2018).

There are also limitations with regard to the generalization of the findings in this study. The results may be (partly) bound to the time period in which the data were gathered, and/or to the organizations in which the study was performed. Also, the results of the analysis of the children's answers may not be applicable to the total population participating in the 'You Matter!' study, as only 42% of the children answered the open-ended questions. There were, however, no clear indications for this leading to a bias in the outcomes, for these children provided a mix of positive and critical feedback. In addition, the generalizability of the findings of the present study could be hampered, because only five group workers were interviewed. It might therefore be important to increase the number of groups workers to be interviewed in future research, although it seems that saturation was reached in the present study, which indicates that it is unlikely that inclusion of more group workers would have added new qualitative information (see Mason, 2010).

The last limitation of this study is that we still know relatively little of the children in the age group 4-8, as they were not asked open-ended questions in the questionnaire. Thus, the study does not yet give enough insight in how to organize the feedback cycle with this young age group. From the 'You matter!' project, there are only anecdotal indications for good practices in working on group climate with the youngest children (for instance, the children seemed to be well capable to explain what they found to be good help from group workers). Future work could be aimed at interviewing these youngest children in residential care.

### **Implications for future research and practice**

Besides the direct implications of the present study which were already noted in the previous paragraphs, the study leads to some more overall lessons for future research and practice with regard to how monitoring instruments can be part of an improvement process in residential care for children.

#### ***Implications for future research***

First, some aspects which appeared to be particularly important to children in this study such as receiving support at the right moments, as well as staff's reactions to anger and aggression, could be included more specifically and structurally in the monitoring process. In the course of the last decennium, methods such as Non-Violent Resistance have gained a lot of attention and are increasingly being applied within residential

care settings (Van der Helm, 2017; Van Gink et al., 2018; Weinblatt & Omer, 2008), which helps to create the right circumstances to stabilize children who have suffered trauma and/or have developed attachment problems. The principles of these methods may be considered in an effort to optimize group climate monitoring instruments. Notably, formulating possible new monitoring questions together with children in residential care could further enhance the ecological validity of these questions (Araújo et al., 2007). This may be done together with the young age groups (4-8 and 8-15), which were included in the present study, but also with adolescents in residential treatment and forensic settings.

Next, one could, besides the six-monthly more extensive measurement, discuss one simple question every week, such as 'how do you rate the group atmosphere of today, on a scale from 1 to 10?'; and keep track of the scores on this question over time, so there is more 'live' feedback. This would possibly make it easier to react on situations as they are, formulate actions together with the children, and thereby shape the desired group process. That would be even more in line with the Routine Process Monitoring, which was until now mostly applied in individual and family treatment settings (Hafkenscheid, 2010; Van Hennik & Hillewaere, 2017). For the 4-8 year olds, this more direct (daily/weekly) way of talking about the group climate may also bring about a positive trend in the scores in the long term. Effects of working with this 'live' feedback could be studied in future research.

### ***Implications for future practice***

In daily practice, the topics that were found to be particularly important to children in the present study (such as the 'group rules', in which children wished to be heard more), could be used to start group conversations. While discussing a topic that already has children's attention, subsequently many other relevant topics concerning the children's living environment can be brought up, which may continuously bring new energy into the group (Pinker, 2018).

Next, besides in the group setting, group climate aspects can also be seen as topics to address at the individual child level. This could be particularly relevant, for example, in light of the finding that children within the same group and at the same measurement occasion could experience the group climate so differently. Notably, listening to children's needs with regard to their living environment, at the group *and* individual level, might not only help to improve this environment, but also reinforce children's personal strengths and induce an increased sense of autonomy (Calheiros, Patrício, & Graça, 2013).

At the organizational level, it can be recommended to monitor the 'working climate', which refers for example to positive and negative team functioning and a shared vision (Van der Helm et al., 2013). This monitoring process could be used parallel with

the feedback cycles of the children, because one process may strengthen the other (Souverain et al., 2013). Positive effects of these processes can supposedly be enhanced when the team's development is facilitated (training, coaching, reflection) by the organizational management.

Looking at the complexities concerned with group workers working in changing shifts, serving a treatment group of eight or nine children who all have their own needs, it will always remain a great challenge to 'do it right'. Given the present reality of budget cuts in youth care, working with smaller groups and more continuity in group workers seems difficult to achieve, but still may be considered necessary. In any case we should always bear in mind the importance of building a purposefully constructed, multi-dimensional living environment, with the desired level of continuity and stability for the children, and opportunities for them to develop a sense of autonomy, relatedness, and competences for the future.

## **Conclusion**

The present study is one of the first to describe and evaluate how the application of a group climate monitoring instrument can be part of an improvement process in residential care for children, in this case, focused on the age groups 4-8 and 8-15. The study indicates a significant decrease of negative group climate over two years' time in the group of 8-15 year old children. It appears to be worthwhile to invest in the monitoring of group climate aspects, and there is also a lot to be gained, such as creating opportunities for teams to reflect together and work on other important preconditions to continuously build on a positive group climate for the children. Future research should focus on further optimizing the monitoring instruments (e.g., topics related to group workers' de-escalating measures and reactions with regard to aggression incidents) and the monitoring processes (e.g., to work with more 'live' feedback besides the more extensive six-monthly measurements). All together, these efforts hopefully lead to institutions with group climates that provide children a safe and positive living environment in which they feel both protected and are stimulated in their development.

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