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Who Is Responsible for the Child? Institutional Betrayal and the Responsibilisation of Children, Families and Frontline Professionals in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Child welfare and safety depend on a chain of actors: parents and carers, families, communities, frontline professionals and the state. When responsibility is unevenly distributed across this chain, accountability for children erodes even where formal legal protection remains. In Turkey, this erosion is acute: the country has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but operates a thin welfare architecture in which state obligations are routinely discharged downward. This paper examines how this downward transfer of responsibility operates in Turkey. Drawing on institutional betrayal theory (Smith and Freyd 2014) and Beck's (1992) concept of organised irresponsibility, we identify three mechanisms by which welfare for children is hollowed out without any single institution being held to account: responsibilisation of the child, responsibilisation of the family and responsibilisation of the frontline professional. This is a conceptually driven case analysis. We examined Turkish official statistics (TÜİK 2023, 2024), United Nations instruments and indices (UNCRC, UNICEF Türkiye, UNDP), reports by Turkish civil society organisations and unions (Çocuk Vakfı, Sosyal-İş Sendikası, IMDAT, Türkiye Okul Yemeği Koalisyonu, TİHEK, TÜKD Antalya) and media-reported cases for the period 2014 to 2025. Sources were thematically coded against the three mechanisms. We identify three mechanisms through which responsibility for safeguarding is shifted away from institutions and redistributed onto those with the least power. Each mechanism transfers an obligation that legally and structurally belongs to the state onto an actor with less capacity to discharge it. The child is reframed as morally complicit in her own victimisation. The family is held accountable for managing structural risk that a retreating welfare state has stopped absorbing. The frontline professional is asked to compensate for thin institutional architecture without commensurate training, supervision or resourcing. The cumulative effect is institutional betrayal of those who depend on the system, sustained by an organised irresponsibility in which every actor can point to another, and no one is answerable. Re-institutionalising responsibility requires three corrections that map onto the three mechanisms: child protection frameworks that refuse to moralise victimisation; social policy that rebuilds the material conditions for family safeguarding; and sustained investment in the frontline workforce. The Turkish case speaks to international debates on safeguarding under welfare-state retrenchment.

1 | Introduction

Children depend on adults and on institutions for almost everything that constitutes their welfare: food, shelter,

education, protection from violence and recognition under the law (Lindsey 2004). This dependence is what makes the question of who is answerable for children so consequential, and why the answer cannot be located in any single actor. Welfare

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Key Practitioner Messages

- Treat child safety as a shared chain of obligations that links the state, services, families and children. When responsibility is transferred to the actor with the least power to discharge it, read that transfer as a marker of institutional betrayal rather than a private failure.
- Resist policy narratives that reduce structural conditions, such as poverty, gendered labour or housing insecurity, to deficiencies of parenting.
- Treat training, supervision, caseloads and protective reporting frameworks for frontline professionals as core safeguarding infrastructure, not as discretionary support.
- Build a safeguarding policy on accountability for systemic risk, recognising that civil society organisations often serve as the de facto monitoring mechanism when official data is partial.

and safety are produced through a chain of obligations that runs across parents, carers, families, schools, social and health services, civil society and the state. When that chain is intact, no single point in it has to bear the whole load. When it is not, the question this paper asks becomes urgent: who is responsible for the child?

We argue that responsibility for child welfare in Turkey has undergone a quiet but consequential transformation. Formal legal protection is in place. Turkey ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994, and domestic law affirms children's rights to health, education and protection from violence. Yet the institutional architecture that should make these rights operational is thin, and the gap between legal commitment and operational capacity is filled not by reform but by a downward transfer of responsibility onto actors who lack the means to discharge it (Erbil and Özbilgin 2026).

Two theoretical lenses help us name what is happening. The first is institutional betrayal theory, developed by Smith and Freyd (2014) and extended by Smidt and Freyd (2018), Adams-Clark and Freyd (2021) and Rosenthal et al. (2025). Institutional betrayal occurs when individuals depend on an institution for protection, support or recognition and the institution either harms them directly or fails to act when it should. The literature has shown that the experience of betrayal compounds the original harm, eroding the trust that makes future help-seeking possible. The second is Beck's (1992) concept of organised irresponsibility, which describes the structural condition under which decisions and risks are produced collectively yet no single actor can be held answerable for them. Organised irresponsibility is what makes institutional betrayal possible at scale: if responsibility is dispersed across enough actors, each can point to another and the harm becomes nobody's fault even as it is everybody's product.

Both lenses point toward a third concept that we place at the centre of the analysis, namely, relational accountability. By relational accountability, we mean the mutually constitutive obligations that bind carers, parents, families, frontline

professionals, communities and the state in the production of child welfare. Accountability is relational rather than individual because no single actor can secure welfare alone (Özbilgin et al. 2026). Each is dependent on and answerable to the others. The deterioration of relational accountability does not mean responsibility disappears. It means responsibility is redistributed downward and inward, to the actor least equipped to bear it. We identify three mechanisms by which this redistribution operates in Turkey: responsibilisation of the child, responsibilisation of the family and responsibilisation of the frontline professional. Each is a specific way in which an obligation owed by the state is shifted to a less powerful actor, and each generates institutional betrayal of the actor on whom the obligation lands.

The Turkish case is instructive because it shows how this redistribution operates without the deinstitutionalisation of children's residence. In jurisdictions where child welfare reform has dismantled large residential institutions, the question of who is answerable for children has been forced into the open: someone, whether kinship carer, foster family or community service, must take on a visible role (Berens and Nelson 2015; Goldman et al. 2020). In Turkey, by contrast, the overwhelming majority of children remain inside families, and the question of state responsibility can therefore be deferred indefinitely. What we describe is not the deinstitutionalisation of children but the deinstitutionalisation of responsibility for children. The two are distinct: children can remain in family care while institutional accountability for their welfare is hollowed out around them.

The argument makes three contributions. First, it specifies an actor-based typology of responsibilisation in child welfare, disaggregating a process that the institutional betrayal literature has tended to describe in aggregate terms (Smith and Freyd 2014; Adams-Clark and Freyd 2021; Rosenthal et al. 2025). The three mechanisms we identify (responsibilisation of the child, of the family and of the frontline professional) allow betrayal to be analysed not as a single institutional failure but as a layered redistribution of obligation onto actors with progressively less structural capacity to discharge it. Second, the paper extends this literature, which has developed predominantly in Anglophone and high-income settings, to a middle-income context in which formal legal protection coexists with retrenched welfare provision and uneven enforcement. The Turkish case shows that responsibilisation can operate in a country that has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and that retains family-based care for the overwhelming majority of children, which means the mechanism does not require either residential institutions or a developed Anglo-American social work apparatus to function. Third, the paper links the responsibilisation literature on parents and families (Gillies 2005; Featherstone et al. 2014) to the institutional betrayal literature on safeguarding (Smith and Freyd 2014; Smidt and Freyd 2018; Rosenthal et al. 2025), showing that they describe two faces of the same structural process: the first names how obligation is transferred, the second names how the transferred obligation is experienced by those on whom it lands. Read together with Beck's (1992) account of organised irresponsibility, the two literatures yield a structural explanation for why reform efforts that target individual institutions struggle to gain traction.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section sets out the conceptual framework and defines the layered structure of responsibility on which our analysis depends. We then describe our methods and present the three mechanisms in the Turkish context, drawing on official statistics and civil society reports for 2014 to 2025. The discussion situates the Turkish case within international scholarship on safeguarding under welfare-state retrenchment, and the conclusion offers mechanism-specific recommendations. Although our case is Turkish, the global prevalence of child maltreatment, even in well-resourced settings (Stoltenborgh et al. 2015), means the question travels.

2 | Conceptual Framework

Our argument unfolds in four steps. First, structural conditions, including welfare-state retrenchment, economic precarity, weak enforcement of children's rights and gendered cultural scripts about childhood and family, generate risks for children that institutions are nominally bound to manage. Second, rather than absorbing these risks, institutions transfer them through three responsabilisation mechanisms: onto the child, onto the family and onto the frontline professional. Third, because these actors lack the structural capacity to discharge the transferred obligations, the relational architecture of accountability deteriorates, and what Smith and Freyd (2014) term institutional betrayal becomes the prevailing experience for children and caregivers. Fourth, this betrayal becomes observable as a set of outcomes, namely, care neglected, rights violated and harms normalised. These outcomes do not represent three separate mechanisms; they are three manifestations of the same underlying betrayal, sustained by the organised irresponsibility (Beck 1992) that makes no single institution answerable. Empirically, they surface across a recurring set of

harm categories, including poverty-related deprivation, child labour, child marriage, abuse, violence and educational exclusion, which the analysis tracks in the Turkish case. Figure 1 sets out this model in schematic form, and the remainder of this section defines each link.

Responsibility for child welfare is not a single quantity but a layered set of obligations. *Legal responsibility* refers to codified rights under domestic law and the UNCRC. *Institutional responsibility* refers to the operational duties of state agencies, schools and health services. *Familial responsibility* refers to the daily care obligations of parents and carers. *Civic responsibility* refers to the obligations of neighbours, communities and civil society. Each of the three responsabilisation mechanisms operates by misaligning these layers, assigning to one level (typically the family or the individual professional) a responsibility that legally and structurally belongs to another (typically the state). Institutional betrayal is the experience of that misalignment by the actors who depend on the institution to act.

The three mechanisms can be stated precisely.

Mechanism 1: Responsibilisation of the child. Children are reframed as morally or behaviourally complicit in the harms inflicted on them. This mechanism appears in cultural scripts that depict children as burdens or sources of trouble, in safeguarding frameworks that locate responsibility for avoiding harm in the child's own peer competence (Firmin et al. 2022), and in the documented tendency of children to internalise blame for victimisation when no institutional response is forthcoming (Ellis 2019). At its limit, this mechanism produces what we term self-responsibilisation: the demand that children manage risks they did not create and cannot structurally avoid.

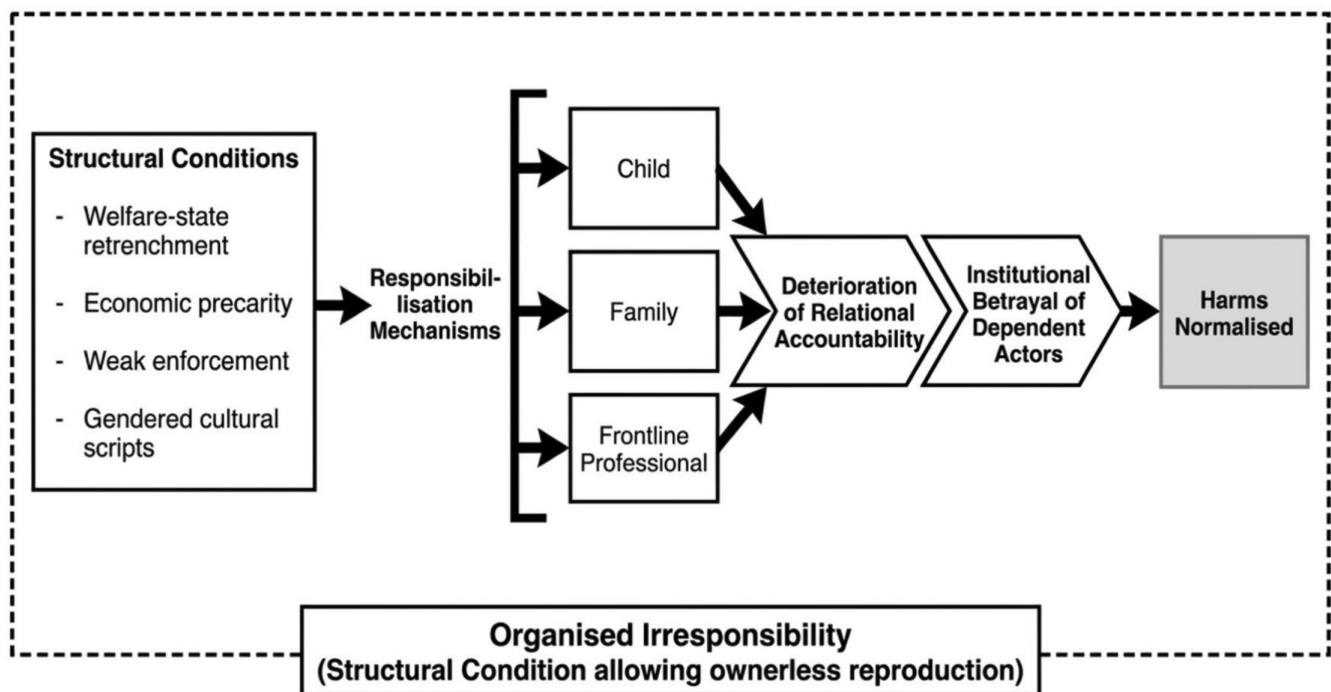


FIGURE 1 | The process relational model of normalisation of harm in child welfare.

Mechanism 2: Responsibilisation of the family. Structural risks generated by labour-market precarity, poverty, weak enforcement of child protection law and the privatisation of essential services are reframed as problems of poor parenting (Gillies 2005; Featherstone et al. 2014). Where the welfare state retreats, families are nominally given more autonomy but in practice given more risk to absorb. The discourse that follows, that families are failing children, performs a structural function: it makes welfare-state withdrawal politically invisible (Barnes 2007).

Mechanism 3: Responsibilisation of the frontline professional. The teachers, social workers, child advocacy centre staff, paediatric nurses, paediatricians and police officers who form the operational layer of safeguarding are positioned as the last line of defence and held accountable for outcomes even where the institutional architecture above them is thin. The international literature on moral injury and burnout among safeguarding professionals (Smidt and Freyd 2018; Rosenthal et al. 2025) describes the predictable consequences: defensive practice, attrition and the further erosion of the very capacity the system depends on.

Poverty is the structural medium through which all three mechanisms operate. It is multidimensional rather than narrowly economic, encompassing nutrition, education, shelter and social participation (White et al. 2003; Bulu and Üstün 2023). When the state withdraws from the redistributive functions that would compensate for this reproduction, the resulting deprivation is converted, through the three mechanisms, into a story about the moral failings of children, families, or workers rather than about the structural conditions they inhabit.

What allows this conversion to be sustained over time is what Beck (1992) terms organised irresponsibility: the structural condition under which decisions and their harmful consequences are produced collectively, yet no single actor can be held answerable. In Turkey, organised irresponsibility operates through the dispersion of safeguarding obligations across overlapping institutions (the Ministry of Family and Social Services, the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Health, the judiciary, local government and civil society) without any one of them having the authority, resources, or political mandate to coordinate the others. Each can plausibly point to another when a child is harmed. Each is therefore plausibly absolved. The cumulative effect is that institutional betrayal becomes systemic rather than incidental: it is not a particular institution that fails a particular child, but a structure designed in such a way that failure has no owner.

The recursive character of this dynamic has recently been formalised for organisational settings. Mergen et al. (2026) model the normalisation of harm as a multilevel cascade in which contextual conditions generate systemic pressures, those pressures activate adaptive responses among the actors subject to them, and the resulting culture feeds back to reconstitute the very conditions that enabled it. Their reproduction loop captures what Figure 1 shows for the welfare-state case: harm persists not because reform is absent but because the system regenerates the pressures that produced the harm in the first place. The responsabilisation of children, of families and of

frontline professionals does not merely follow from welfare-state retrenchment; it actively reproduces it, by making the structural withdrawal politically invisible and by relocating the burden of safeguarding onto actors who lack the standing to make the transfer visible. Read this way, the puzzle of persistence resolves: it is not that reform fails despite good intentions, but that the architecture of organised irresponsibility regenerates the conditions of its own operation faster than reform can dismantle them.

Each of the three mechanisms produces institutional betrayal in a structurally specific way. The child is betrayed by the cultural and legal frame that holds her complicit. The family is betrayed by the social policy that demands welfare provision after depriving it of the means to deliver. The frontline professional is betrayed by being asked to compensate for the absent state. Institutional betrayal occurs when individuals or groups depend on an institution for protection, recognition or support, and the institution either acts against them or fails to act on their behalf (Smith and Freyd 2014). The literature on institutional betrayal has shown that this experience compounds the original harm, eroding the trust that makes future help-seeking possible (Smidt and Freyd 2018; Adams-Clark and Freyd 2021), and that caregivers report a sense of betrayal when institutional responses to maltreatment are dismissive or inadequate (Rosenthal et al. 2025). What organised irresponsibility adds to this picture is the structural explanation: betrayal is not a contingent failure of well-designed institutions but the predictable output of institutional architectures in which responsibility has no owner.

These betrayals become observable in the documented rights violations that children face, including neglect within the family, at school, in public spaces and within official institutions, alongside the harms of accidents, violence, abuse, malnutrition, child labour and early marriage that follow when institutions hold one another responsible and none acts. Because official monitoring is partial, much of the evidence for these violations is produced by civil society organisations, a point we return to in the analysis.

3 | Methods

This is a conceptually driven case analysis. The paper develops a theoretical claim about three mechanisms of responsabilisation in child welfare and tests its plausibility against the Turkish case using publicly available documentary evidence. We do not generate primary data. The analytic contribution is the framework and its application.

Sources fall into four categories. First, Turkish official statistics on children, principally TÜİK reports for 2023 and 2024. Second, United Nations instruments and indices, including the UNCRC, UNICEF Türkiye reports and the UNDP Multidimensional Poverty Index. Third, reports by Turkish civil society organisations and unions, including Çocuk Vakfı, Sosyal-İş Sendikası, IMDAT (Polat 2019), the Türkiye Okul Yemeği Koalisyonu, TİHEK and TÜKD Antalya. Fourth, media-reported cases drawn from outlets recognised in the Turkish journalism field (BBC Türkçe, Medyascope), used illustratively rather than as a representative sample.

The time window is 2014 to 2025, chosen to capture the period in which several of the policy shifts central to our analysis (notably MESEM and ÇEDES) consolidated. Cases were included if they appeared in the documentary record during this window, involved at least one of the harm categories named in our framework (poverty-related deprivation, child labour, child marriage, abuse, violence or educational exclusion), and could be linked to an identifiable institutional response or nonresponse. We then thematically coded each source against the three mechanisms, iterating between the conceptual framework and the empirical material until coding stabilised. Where the same case spoke to more than one mechanism, we coded it under each.

Three limitations follow from this design. First, our case selection is illustrative, not statistically representative. We do not claim that the rates of harms described are generalisable beyond the documented cases. Second, the absence of primary fieldwork means we cannot directly access children's, families' or professionals' subjective experience of betrayal. The analytic claim is therefore about the structure of the system, not the lived experience of any individual within it. The latter is a priority for future empirical work. A third limitation concerns coder reliability. Thematic coding was conducted by the authors without independent inter-rater verification, and we therefore make no claim about the reproducibility of category assignment beyond the consistency we achieved through iterative comparison against the framework. Where a source spoke to more than one mechanism, we coded it under each rather than forcing a single attribution, which preserves analytical breadth at the cost of clean partition.

4 | Child Welfare and Safety in Turkey

Three figures orient what follows. At the end of 2024, approximately 21 million children aged 0 to 18 lived in Turkey, comprising 25.5% of the population (TÜİK 2025). According to official statistics, 33% of those children lived in poverty (TÜİK 2024). The labour-force participation rate of children aged 15 to 17 was 25% (TÜİK 2025). These figures establish the scale of the population on which the three mechanisms operate. In what follows, we examine each in turn, drawing on official statistics, civil society reports and documented cases.

The sections that follow are organised by mechanism rather than by harm category. We treat the documented patterns of poverty, malnutrition, violence, child labour, child marriage and educational exclusion as evidence of the three mechanisms at work rather than as a separate inventory of issues. Each subsection therefore moves from the documented pattern to the mechanism that produces it, and the same case can appear under more than one mechanism where it is doing more than one kind of structural work. The aggregate national context, set out immediately below, frames all three.

Children's rights are based on the principle that children grow up in a protective environment. A protective environment is created by providing the necessary opportunities for the child's care, education and development, as well as by the government's establishment of legal and administrative infrastructure (Uğurlu and Gülsen 2014). The United Nations adopted

the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, and Turkey ratified it in 1994. It is a more inclusive regulation that encompasses social issues beyond education and health (Karakaş and Çevik 2016). Although children's rights are under legal guarantee, violations of children's rights have reached great dimensions with the significant impact of neglect and poverty (Taplak et al. 2014).

The key indicators of child poverty include health, education and a basic standard of living (UNDP 2023). However, child poverty and victimisation vary under different subheadings. We can list these headings as follows (IOM and NRC 2014; Child Matters 2024; TÜKD Antalya 2024). At least one child resides in 42.8% of households in Turkey. The attendance rates for preschool and primary school are 84.3% and 95%, respectively. Children with special needs who receive special education constitute 3% of school children. In terms of the general health status of the child population, 5% of children are in fair, poor or very poor health; 11% of children are unable to afford new clothes due to financial inadequacy and deprivation; 24.5% of children do not have toys to play with at home; and 41.2% of children cannot invite their friends to play or eat at home. The rate of children who cannot participate in leisure activities is 64.1%. The rate of Internet usage among children aged 6–15 is 91.3%. Children primarily use the Internet to watch videos (TÜİK 2025).

Nutrition plays a crucial role in child welfare. Children face hunger, hidden hunger (a low-nutrient diet) and food insecurity (Şık 2023). Although the family and carers are responsible for the child's nutrition, the primary responsibility lies with the state. Economic and class inequalities expose children to hunger and food insecurity. In Turkey, 32.3% of children do not consume at least one serving of meat, chicken or fish per day. The rate of children who cannot consume fresh fruit and vegetables at least once a day is 13% (TÜİK 2025). Inability to access food and insecurity of the food accessed negatively affect children's right to nutrition, which is one of their fundamental rights. The responsibility for hunger and food security, which have social effects, should not be reduced to the responsibility of individuals for nutrition, because education and nutrition are children's public rights. The policy choice not to provide universal school meals, despite the international evidence base for their effectiveness and despite their adoption in over 100 countries (Türkiye Okul Yemeği Koalisyonu 2024), is precisely the move by which structural responsibility is converted into family responsibility. Hunger is then read not as the visible signature of an absent state but as a private failure of household provisioning.

These indicators describe a large child population, a quarter of the country, in which deprivation is widespread rather than marginal: a third of children live in poverty, a quarter of those aged 15 to 17 are in the labour force, and substantial proportions lack adequate nutrition, social participation and protection. The legal guarantee of children's rights coexists with material conditions that routinely undercut it. The analysis that follows turns from the scale of these harms to the way they are produced and sustained. In each case, it traces the same movement: a risk generated by structural and political conditions is displaced downward onto the actor least able to refuse it, whether the child, the family, or the frontline professional. We therefore read the documented patterns of poverty, malnutrition, violence, child

labour, child marriage and educational exclusion as evidence of the three mechanisms at work, taking each in turn.

4.1 | Mechanism 1: Responsibilisation of the Child

The cultural framing of children in Turkey assigns them an ambivalent moral status. They are nominally protected and rhetorically valued, but in everyday discourse they appear as burdens, deficits, or sources of trouble. Proverbs treat childhood as something to be endured rather than supported: having a child is having a problem, travelling with a child invites trouble, raising a child is like gnawing a stone (Ercan 2014). Children are valued instrumentally, to the extent that they provide economic or social benefit, and treated as a burden until they reach adulthood. This framing is not innocuous. It does the cultural work of preparing children to be held accountable for their own welfare in the absence of structural support.

The mechanism completes itself when children internalise the framing. Ellis (2019) documents the pattern in cases of child sexual abuse: in the absence of an institutional response that names the harm and its perpetrator, children come to read the harm as evidence of their own complicity. Turkish media coverage reinforces this through a victim-centred and often moralising frame in cases of violence, abuse and child marriage (Arslan and Topal 2021). When responsibility for avoidance is placed on the child, the institutions that should have prevented the harm recede from view. This is institutional betrayal in its purest form: the child depends on adults and on the state for protection, and the state's response is to ask why she did not protect herself.

The internalisation described above is reinforced when the institutions children turn to for protection model the same blame structure. Where the school treats the children's behaviour as the cause of the discipline imposed on them, the cultural framing of the child as morally complicit acquires an institutional voice. In educational settings, the formal authority of the school can itself be exercised as violence, with physical punishment used in the name of discipline. Such violence does not produce discipline; children subjected to it tend to become more violent in turn, entering the cycle of 'operant aggression' in which the child attacks the aggressor and reproduces the aggression (Bulut 2008). This tendency carries negative consequences for the individual and for society over the short and longer term, and it compounds the life-threatening violence many children already face at home and in public space (UNICEF 2025).

4.2 | Mechanism 2: Responsibilisation of the Family

Where Mechanism 1 acts on the child, Mechanism 2 acts on the household. Risks generated by labour-market precarity, regressive economic policy and the privatisation of essential services are reframed as failures of the family to feed, protect, educate, or supervise its children. The reframing is rhetorically powerful because it has a kernel of truth: families are indeed proximate to children and do bear daily responsibility for them. What the reframing obscures is that the conditions under which families can discharge that responsibility are

themselves a policy variable. The displacement is the same one traced for the child, moved up one level: a structurally generated risk is relocated onto the family as though it were a private failing.

Social inequality causes children in lower economic classes to experience more rights violations and lower welfare levels. Child labour also forces children to work due to class inequality. In addition, although child labour is not considered a problem in society, it is also legitimised (Akpınar and Dertli 2023). The labour force participation rate of children aged 15–17 in Turkey is 25% (TÜİK 2025). This situation is exemplified by ongoing legal changes to the duration and characteristics of education, particularly in primary and secondary education, and by the absence of scientifically based, stable policies in education. For example, in Turkey, vocational education-based schools provide technical education but pave the way for child labour exploitation under the name of an internship. There are approximately 1.5 million children enrolled in MESEM vocational training centres (MEB 2025). Civil society reports describe MESEM as making child labour increasingly attractive to small and medium enterprises (Çocuk Vakfı 2023). Additionally, the number of children working without registration on the streets, in agriculture and in hard labour is considerable (Tatar 2024). According to statistics compiled from press reports on official or unregistered child workers, at least 695 child workers have lost their lives in the last 10 years. Child worker deaths were most common among children employed in the agricultural and construction sectors. With the vocational high school program (MESEM) carried out in Turkey, children are being removed from formal education, and child labour is increasing (Sosyal-İş Sendikası 2024).

According to official statistics in Turkey, the majority of child deaths occur due to external injuries and poisoning (TÜİK 2025). In Turkey, acts of murder against children are approximately twice the world average (Erbay 2024). Domestic violence and incest are also quite common (Çocuk Vakfı 2023), and some of them are revealed through applications to health and security institutions and social media. The failure of parents and carers to fulfil their responsibilities to provide children with general health, nutrition and a safe environment within the family is also a serious violation of children's rights. In cases where children reach health institutions, the lack of information among health personnel in detecting and reporting violations of children's rights is a significant problem (Bakır and Kapucu 2017). In cases of violence, abuse and murder experienced by children, it is seen that the social environment (neighbours, relatives and community) is as much the perpetrator as first-degree relatives (Erbay 2024). The ÇİM model has operated since 2010 across child advocacy centres, with the goal of providing a single, child-friendly setting for forensic interviewing and medical examination. Concerns about its effectiveness centre on under-staffing, inconsistent training and the absence of standardised reporting protocols (Tonyalı et al. 2023). Mandatory reporting expectations sit on health professionals who often lack specific training in detecting and documenting child maltreatment (Bakır and Kapucu 2017). It is also notable that cases identified through ÇİM include public officials among suspected perpetrators (Özkan 2024), which means that frontline professionals are sometimes asked to report against the institutions of which

they are part. Without explicit protective frameworks, this expectation is structurally unsafe for the worker and structurally inadequate for the child.

Violence, murder, sexual abuse and harassment that children are exposed to constitute children's rights violations that are frequently covered in the media. It is observed that these rights violations, which are widely reported on social media and in the press in Turkey, are met with outrage by those who adopt a rights-based approach, while prevention and monitoring mechanisms remain largely passive. In addition, the way the media covers news about children's rights is not inclusive and rights-protective. Children are mostly covered in the press with negative cases. The way the press covers children's cases can also pave the way for potential violations of children's rights (Arslan and Topal 2021).

Child marriage shows the same conversion in a different register. The legal age of marriage in Turkey is 18, with a permitted reduction to 16 by parental consent and court decision (Yakit and Coşkun 2014). A total of 1.6% of girls aged 16 to 17 are officially married (TÜİK 2025), with no statistics available on unofficial marriages of under-16s. The literature identifies poverty and household welfare as the primary drivers, with traditions and post-abuse marital coercion as secondary drivers (Yakit and Coşkun 2014). What is striking is how rarely the state appears in this account. The structural conditions that make child marriage a household survival strategy are policy outputs, but the policy producing them is invisible in the public discourse, which treats child marriage as a problem of family values or rural backwardness.

Anti-secular and neoliberal discourses converge in legitimising rights violations across child marriage, education and labour. In public speech and on social media, anti-secular framings of child marriage and child neglect are prevalent, including in the discourse of some civil society organisations, and these framings work against the universalist premise on which children's rights rest (Tapolak et al. 2014). Such framings are not free-standing cultural artefacts; they are politically useful because they provide moral cover for the policy choices that produce the harms in the first place. The MESEM programme channels children into wage labour under the name of vocational training (Sosyal-İş Sendikası 2024), and the ÇEDES programme imports unscientific and confessional content into classrooms (BBC Türkçe 2024). Read together, the two programmes show how policy can produce harmful outcomes for children while distributing accountability across so many actors that no single one is answerable: the textbook condition of organised irresponsibility.

4.3 | Mechanism 3: Responsibilisation of the Frontline Professional

The third mechanism operates on the workforce. Frontline professionals, including teachers, social workers, child advocacy centre (ÇİM) staff, paediatric nurses, paediatricians and police, are positioned as the last line of safeguarding even where the institutional architecture above them is thin. Whatever the state does not do directly, they are expected to do as a matter of professional duty. The expectation is rarely matched by the

resources, training, supervision or protective frameworks that would make it deliverable.

In Turkey, education is not a public right that everyone benefits from equally; rather, it is a powerful opportunity for economically advantaged classes. The privatisation of education and the decrease in the quality of education in schools prevent children from obtaining the right to education under equal conditions (Kuzulu 2022). In addition, violence against children in educational institutions is also striking. A total of 14% of children are subjected to peer bullying (TÜİK 2025). In addition to peer violence, cases of violence from school administrators or teachers to students are also increasing (Taşar 2019). Physical punishment in Turkish schools, with prevalence figures from earlier surveys ranging from 50% to 70% of children affected, and a majority of teachers regarding it as a necessary disciplinary tool (MEB (Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı) 2014; Bulut 2008; Taşar 2019), is best read not as a story about individual misconduct but as the predictable output of a configuration in which teachers manage classrooms of children, many of them in poverty, hunger and domestic stress, without the supervisory, pedagogical or welfare infrastructure that would make noncoercive discipline workable. The harm is real, but locating its cause exclusively in the individual teacher reproduces Mechanism 3 in the very moment of analysing it.

The MESEM and ÇEDES programmes show how the mechanism operates through policy. MESEM positions teachers as gatekeepers to a system that the Sosyal-İş Sendikası (2024) has documented as a route into child labour, predominantly in agriculture and construction. ÇEDES has been criticised by educators for importing unscientific and confessional content into classrooms (BBC Türkçe 2024). In each case, professionals are simultaneously asked to safeguard children and structurally prevented from doing so. The international literature describes the predictable consequences: moral injury, burnout and defensive practice, all of which compound rather than mitigate institutional betrayal experienced by children and caregivers (Smidt and Freyd 2018; Rosenthal et al. 2025). Responsibilisation of the frontline professional is therefore the third mechanism by which relational accountability deteriorates: it transfers the obligations of an under-resourced state onto the individual practitioner, who is then held accountable for outcomes that structural investment alone could prevent.

5 | Discussion

The three mechanisms identified above do not act independently. They reinforce each other in a recognisable sequence. A child reframed as complicit in her own victimisation provides the moral cover for blaming her family. A family blamed for the consequences of poverty provides the political cover for under-resourcing the frontline workforce that should have intervened. A frontline workforce structurally unable to intervene returns the harm to the child, who is then read once again as the author of her own situation. This is what Beck (1992) describes as organised irresponsibility: a structure in which responsibility is so dispersed that no single point in it can be held answerable, and in which the cumulative outcome (institutional betrayal of

those who depend on the system) appears to no one as the result of a decision.

5.1 | Mechanism 1 in Comparative Perspective

International scholarship on safeguarding has documented the limits of household-bounded models in contexts where harm is extra-familial or peer-based (Firmin et al. 2022) and the persistence of self-blame in children whose victimisation receives no institutional response (Ellis 2019). What the Turkish case adds is a demonstration that legal protection alone, without cultural and institutional reinforcement, does not displace the moral framing of children as complicit. Ratification of the UNCRC in 1994 has not, by itself, produced public discourse in which children are recognisably outside the moral economy of blame.

5.2 | Mechanism 2 in Comparative Perspective

The responsabilisation of parents has been the focus of a substantial literature on Anglophone child welfare (Gillies 2005; Featherstone et al. 2014). That literature has tended to identify social work practice as the principal site of responsabilisation. The Turkish case shows that responsabilisation of the family also operates through education policy, labour policy and the visible withdrawal of universal provision such as school meals. The mechanism does not require a developed social work apparatus to function. It requires only that the state's withdrawal be politically invisible, which the discourse of family virtue achieves.

5.3 | Mechanism 3 in Comparative Perspective

The international literature on moral injury and burnout among safeguarding professionals has documented the predictable consequences of asking frontline workers to compensate for thin institutional architecture (Smidt and Freyd 2018; Rosenthal et al. 2025). The Turkish case adds that frontline professionals can also be asked to report against the institutions of which they are part, as in the ÇİM cases involving public-official suspects (Özkan 2024). Without protective reporting frameworks, this expectation is structurally unworkable, and the resulting silence is itself a further iteration of institutional betrayal.

5.4 | Cumulative Effect

Smith and Freyd (2014) describe institutional betrayal as the experience of being failed by an institution one depends on. The Turkish case suggests that betrayal at scale requires more than institutional failure: it requires an organisational structure designed in such a way that failure has no owner. This is why we read institutional betrayal and organised irresponsibility together. The first names the experience of dependent actors. The second names the structural condition that makes the experience reproducible. Both are needed to explain why the Turkish system continues to produce predictable harms to children even where individual institutions affirm their commitment to

children's rights, and why reform efforts framed at the level of any single institution have struggled to gain traction.

Read through the fourfold typology of responsibility set out in the framework, the Turkish case shows a systematic pattern: the state defaults on its institutional responsibility, attempts to discharge it as familial responsibility, fails to enforce its legal responsibility and leaves civic responsibility (carried by civil society organisations) to do most of the documentary and advocacy work that institutions should do.

The caregiver experience is part of the same structure. Rosenthal et al. (2025) show that caregivers report a sense of betrayal when institutional responses to maltreatment are dismissive or inadequate, and that this experience compounds the original trauma and erodes trust in future help-seeking. In the Turkish case, this means Mechanism 2 has a recursive quality: the family that has been responsabilised for managing structural risk is then betrayed a second time by the institutional response to the harms that follow, which closes the loop by treating the family's prior compliance with the responsabilisation as evidence of its inadequacy.

The cultural, economic and legal drivers identified earlier in the paper do not operate as parallel causes of children's victimisation. They operate as the conditions through which the three mechanisms become possible: cultural scripts supply the framing in which the child can be held morally complicit, economic policy supplies the deprivation that the family is then asked to absorb, and legal gaps supply the discretion that frontline professionals are asked to exercise without protection. Read this way, the drivers are not a separate explanation of harm; they are the machinery through which responsibility is redistributed downward.

To expect the neoliberal state to correct a problem it has policy reasons to maintain is to misread the structure. Where the state has withdrawn from redistributive functions, civil society organisations have functioned as the de facto monitoring infrastructure. The statistics on which our analysis depends, including child worker deaths (Sosyal-İş Sendikası 2024), hidden hunger in schools (Şık 2023; Türkiye Okul Yemeği Koalisyonu 2024), child rights violations (Polat 2019) and access to justice (TİHEK 2022), are produced and circulated by Turkish civil society. Any account of how to re-institutionalise responsibility for children that ignores this fact is incomplete.

6 | Conclusion

Responsibility for child welfare and safety in Turkey has been deinstitutionalised, not by accident but through three identifiable mechanisms. Children are reframed as morally complicit in the harms they suffer. Families are held accountable for managing risks generated by labour-market precarity, retrenched welfare provision and the privatisation of education. Frontline professionals are made the last line of safeguarding without the training, supervision, or institutional architecture that role requires. Read together, these mechanisms produce institutional betrayal (Smith and Freyd 2014), and they are sustained by the organised irresponsibility (Beck 1992) that disperses

accountability so widely that no single institution can be held answerable.

The neoliberal dimension of this process is concrete rather than rhetorical. We have identified four specific policy expressions: the privatisation and quality erosion of public education (Kuzulu 2022), the channelling of children into MESEM as a labour-market subsidy under the name of vocational training (Sosyal-İş Sendikası 2024), the absence of universal school meals despite the international evidence base for their effectiveness (Türkiye Okul Yemeği Koalisyonu 2024) and the discursive shift from public provision to family virtue, which makes structural withdrawal politically invisible.

Re-institutionalising responsibility requires three corrections that map onto the three mechanisms. Against responsabilisation of the child, child protection law and practice must reject any framing that treats children as morally complicit in the harms inflicted on them, including in media coverage, in criminal justice responses and in school disciplinary systems. Against responsabilisation of the family, social policy must rebuild the material conditions of family safeguarding: universal school meals, accessible childcare, income support and regulated work in place of the MESEM pathway. Against responsabilisation of the frontline professional, sustained investment is needed in training, supervision, caseload limits and protective reporting frameworks for ÇİM and other frontline workers, including frameworks that make it safe to report against actors within the state itself.

The role of Turkish civil society in this agenda is not aspirational. Çocuk Vakfı, Sosyal-İş Sendikası, the Türkiye Okul Yemeği Koalisyonu, IMDAT and the human rights monitoring of TİHEK are already the de facto monitoring infrastructure in domains where official data are partial or absent, including the documentation of child worker deaths, the prevalence of hidden hunger and the persistence of physical punishment in classrooms. Recognising and resourcing that role is itself a step toward re-institutionalisation, because organised irresponsibility is sustained partly by the absence of an accountability counter-power. Civil society in Turkey already functions as that counter-power on the data side. What it lacks is policy traction. In this respect, civil society advocacy contributes to re-institutionalising responsibility not by adding new obligations to an already overburdened system but by making visible the dispersion of accountability on which organised irresponsibility depends for its operation. Awareness of who is being asked to bear what, and on whose behalf, is itself a precondition for any redistribution of obligation back upward to the institutions that owe it.

For practitioners, the implication of this analysis is not that they should bear additional responsibility but that they should be able to name what they are being asked to bear. A frontline worker who recognises that a missing supervisor, an absent training framework, or a court system that will not act on a referral is part of an organised dispersion of accountability is in a different position from one who reads the same conditions as personal failure. The same recognition matters for parents and carers facing institutions that ask why they did not protect a child the institution itself was supposed to protect.

While the analysis is rooted in the Turkish case, the three mechanisms are not specific to Turkey. Where welfare states retreat and formal child protection law remains nominally in force, responsabilisation of children, of families and of frontline professionals is a predictable institutional pattern. The contribution of the Turkish case is to show how that pattern operates without the deinstitutionalisation of children's residence: even where children remain firmly inside families, institutional responsibility for their welfare can itself be hollowed out. The framework therefore yields a testable proposition for comparative work. Wherever a state combines formal ratification of child rights instruments with sustained welfare-state retrenchment, the three mechanisms should be observable, and the absence of any one of them in a structurally comparable case would constitute a useful disconfirmation. The retrenchment frame is not the only setting in which these mechanisms are likely to appear. Wherever responsibility for children is dispersed across institutions without a coordinating authority, whether because welfare provision is being withdrawn, was never comprehensively built or is fragmented across jurisdictions, the same downward transfer of obligation onto children, families and frontline professionals may follow. The apparatus of responsabilisation, organised irresponsibility and relational accountability should therefore travel to any system in which formal child rights coexist with an architecture that leaves systemic risk without an owner. The Turkish case is not exceptional in the harms it produces; it is instructive because it shows the mechanisms operating without the residential institutionalisation that has, in other settings, forced the question of accountability into the open. The question with which we began (who is responsible for the child?) admits of a structural answer in such systems only when the structures themselves are repaired.

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Ethics Statement

All data analysed are publicly available; no human participants were involved.

Consent

This paper is conceptual, no human participants were involved in this study. Therefore, there is no informed consent for the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

This conceptual paper draws on policy documents, institutional reports, public testimonies and media cases from Turkey. Therefore, there is no data availability statement.

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