Reviewer's report

Title: Care-'Less': Exploring the interface between child care and parental control in the context of child rights for workers in Children's Homes in Ghana

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Reviewer: Judi Mesman

Reviewer's report:

This is a very interesting and important paper that raises crucial issues regarding the effectiveness of implementing children's rights requirements into a non-Western cultural context. I only have a few suggestions and comments.

Most importantly, I think the authors could include some more discussion of research showing that caregiving practices and their impacts on children depend on cultural context. The work by Lansford et al. clearly shows that parental control in the form of physical discipline has much less negative repercussions for child development in countries where such punishment is normative than in countries where it is frowned upon. Similarly work by Deater-Deckard suggests that in certain cultural communities, NOT using physical punishment might be a sign of neglect rather than good parenting (which seems relevant to the finding that caregivers in Ghana just ignoring the difficult children as described in the manuscript).

Nevertheless, most authors in this field agree that physical punishment is not preferred in any context, and advocate alternative strategies. Some mention is made of training for the caregivers in the children's homes, but it is unclear from this manuscript what that training entails and what might be improved to make the caregivers feel more empowered to handle the children with alternative strategies. Or is training only suggested here and not yet a reality? Could the authors make suggestions on what type of training would be needed?

I find the theme of 'rules imposed by foreigners' very important, as it also relates to the treatment of ethnic minority parents in Western countries, whose parenting qualities are being evaluated based on Western norms that often leave very little room for different perspectives. This theme might be one of the most pressing ones in current-day child service delivery in the Western world, and similarly reflects the delicate (im)balance between universal children's rights and parenting norms in different cultural contexts. If space constraints allow it, this might be mentioned in the manuscript, to also emphasize the broader ramifications of these issues and their relevance to caregiving situations in many countries.

On page 5, the authors write "Thus, despite reported successes since child rights principles were introduced in Ghana, there have also been some challenges with researchers reporting social
problems including dysfunctional family relations, separation of children from their parents and, sometimes, alienation of children from their caregivers." This is a pretty strong statement that I think requires some clarification. What type of research has uncovered the link between child rights principles and dysfunctional family relations? What sort of evidence was found for these assertions? I raise the question because the sentence implies (although not states) causal effects that are notoriously difficult to establish when examining policy effects on groups of people.

Finally, the authors (understandably so) stay quite neutral when it comes to the key question of whether children's rights can be formulated as universally as they are now stated with respect to specific caregiving practices (such as corporal punishment). Nevertheless, I would be interested in a brief discussion of whether it would be at all feasible (practically speaking, politically speaking, ethically speaking) to reformulate some children's rights to be more culturally inclusive. Should/could the international community even entertain this thought? With just a little bit more polemic edge this manuscript will have more impact.

Are the methods appropriate and well described?
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Yes

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