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Children's Workforce
Development Council

Children's views and experiences of their contact with social workers: A focused review of the evidence

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Acknowledgements

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Background

Interest in children's views and experiences on a wide range of issues, including their contact with social workers and other professionals (Thomas 2002, 2005; Franklin and Sloper 2005; Oliver et al, 2006), reflects national and international recognition of children's rights, as well as an increasing policy emphasis on the development of personalised services, particularly in relation to looked after children and children considered 'in need'. The growth of integrated working in children's services also provides a more recent and important context for exploring children's perspectives on social work practice.

In response to the importance attached to integrated working, government policy has promoted a 'common core of skills and knowledge' in the initial and continuing professional development of social workers and other adults working with children and young people (DCSF, 2005, 2008b). Nevertheless, social workers continue to retain specific statutory responsibilities towards children and recent research indicates that most children perceive their social worker as the most important professional in their lives (Stein, 2009).

However, recent research also highlights tension between the demands of social work tasks and the skills required for social workers to undertake effective direct work with children (Stein, 2009). The review is therefore aimed to at exploring children's reported experiences in terms of their relationship with social workers, as well as their views about social work tasks, and their perceptions concerning what makes a 'good social worker'. The review also aimed to discuss the implications for initial qualification and continuing professional development in social work and to identify potential areas for further research.

Building on the work of an earlier review (Fuller, undated), a scoping of the evidence was undertaken via searches of key databases, recent and relevant journals, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and specialist research organisations. In addition, e-mail contact was made with colleagues at the Institute of Education, and the Universities of York, Oxford, Loughborough and East Anglia. It should be noted that, within the limited resources available, the research comprised a focused, and not a systematic, review of the literature published in the last ten years.

2. Children's views about social work tasks

2.1 Support for children living with their families

The review examines social work tasks from the perspectives of children living with their families, as well as children in foster and residential care, and care leavers. However, and regardless of their specific circumstances, children commonly voice a wish to be treated as individuals, and not as too closely identified with a specific problem or 'disorder' (Hill, 1999; Blueprint Project 2005; OFSTED 2009a, 2009b).

Children's initial contact with social workers is likely to be prompted by others, such as parents, teachers or other adults. Consequently, children tend to treat social workers with caution, and may feel stigmatised, powerless and confused (Hill, 1999; Golding et al, 2006). Children, parents and social workers may also have different views about the problems facing children

and their parents and how they might best be addressed, requiring social workers to clarify expectations and assumptions of all parties and to pay careful attention to children's views. Some children have criticised an over-emphasis on parents' concerns and a need for more support for themselves to enable them to continue to live with their parents, if they so wish (Timms and Thoburn, 2003).

Research shows that children tend to find child protection processes as confusing and distressing, and that they fear the consequences of confiding in their social worker (Cossar and Long, 2008; Laws and Kirby, 2008). Overall, evidence highlights the need for better training on involving children in assessment processes and communication skills to facilitate children's participation in meetings.

Social workers may passively assume that children with disabilities are not capable of expressing their views, or that their parents can function as adequate proxies for the voice of the child (Morris, 2005; Audit Commission, 2003). A variety of methods for communicating with disabled children have been developed in recent years (see Scott and Larcher, 2002; Brewster, 2004) and might usefully be more widely included in social work training.

Some children are more likely than others to be positioned on the periphery of social work practice. For example, young carers are often afraid of talking about their caring responsibilities to social workers because they fear the consequences of asking for help for themselves (Aldridge and Becker, 2003). This suggests that greater sensitivity in social work practice and wider availability of flexible support for young carers is required.

2.2   Children and young people in care

Having a Say
Unresolved differences of opinion between parents and social workers may increase the likelihood of emergency admissions into care (Hill, 1999). This can be traumatic for children and reduce their scope for exercising choice of placement whereas entry into care as part of a planned process may allow children more choice of placement (Blueprint Project, 2005).

While children's safety is a key priority, children are clear that they want a major say in decision-making before they are placed away from their parents (OFSTED, 2009b). Many children may be relieved to be removed from an unsafe situation (Ward et al, 2005) but they may also feel sadness, anxiety and grief (Blueprint Project, 2005; Timms and Thoburn, 2003). Improved social work support to children might therefore mean putting more time into preparing children for entry into care and supporting them through the process.

Children report that the decisions social workers make about their living arrangements has a big impact on their lives and that, as a result, they want to have more of a say in decision-making, to have a choice of placement, and to be informed about what decisions are made and why (OFSTED, 2009a; Golding et al, 2006). While most children report that they have a say in their care plan and are in agreement with its contents (OFSTED, 2009a), many children find planning meetings and reviews alienating and intimidating (McLeod, 2006; Thomas, 2002, 2005)

Disabled children were rarely consulted in the course of making placements or when reviews were carried out (Abbott et al, 2000). This is of particular concern for disabled children in residential care, who are more vulnerable to abuse and whose cognitive or communication

impairments may make disclosure difficult (Morris, 2005). This underlines the importance of improved training in communication skills for direct work with disabled children.

Privately fostered children, children in kinship care, and children in youth custody are also less likely to be asked for their views (Broad et al, 2001; Morris, 2005; Hart, 2006). Children in youth custody commonly report feeling 'forgotten' by social services, even though social workers are regarded as having an important role in their lives in relation to sorting out financial problems, clothing allowances and family difficulties.

Placements
Whether children are fostered, placed in residential care, adopted or cared for by kin, children's well-being is influenced by the extent to which social workers achieve a good 'fit' between the child and his or her carers. Some children reported that this might mean treating a placement initially as a trial period (Sinclair et al, 2001; OFSTED, 2009b). Some children also report wanting delays and uncertainty about where they are placed to be reduced.

Many children report that repeated placement moves can create difficulties in establishing a positive relationship with their carers, disrupt their education and friendship networks, create difficulties in maintaining contact with family and friends, and foster feelings of powerlessness (OFSTED, 2009a, 2009b; Sinclair et al, 2001; Barnardo's 2007 cited in Mainey, 2009).

However, while children want more stability in their lives, their main priority is to reduce *unwanted* moves (OFSTED, 2009a; Sinclair et al, 2001). This suggests that, while social workers should operate in favor of reducing repeated moves, there should also be sufficient flexibility to allow children to stay in a temporary placement if they are happy there, or to move them from a placement where they are unhappy.

Education
Overall, children tend to have mixed views about their satisfaction with social work support for their education (Mainey et al, 2009; Barnardo's 2006). Support services for children excluded from school or awaiting a school place following a change in care placement have been identified as a particular gap in provision (OFSTED, 2009c; Morgan 2007b). Children may need extra support from their social workers if they have a problem at school, but they also want to avoid standing out from their peers as a child in care, and would therefore prefer social workers to avoid organising reviews and other meetings at school during lunch breaks or lessons times.

Contact
Research shows that most children want some form of contact with their birth families, but that the form and frequency that such contact takes may vary according to the wishes of the individual child eg. monthly or weekly meetings, by telephone or face-to-face, with some but not all family members (Sinclair, et al 2001). Social workers may need to treat children's feelings about contact with birth families more seriously. They may need to intervene to prevent contact, change its nature, or work on the relationships involved, as required.

Leaving care
Care leavers need practical and emotional support across a range of issues, including housing, further education, training and employment, information on benefits and other sources of financial support, and access to health services (Allen, 2003; Barn et al, 2005; Lewis et al, 2007). Care leavers may also need more support in accessing services for parents (Chase et al, 2008).

The experiences of young parents in and after leaving care highlight a need for more sensitive and less punitive assessments of their parenting needs, and better support services (Chase et al, 2008). The needs of young fathers in and after leaving care remain largely invisible to social services (Tryer et al, 2005).

Multi-agency working
Research shows that while children may have many professionals involved in their lives, they tend to view their social worker as the most important (Stein, 2009). Nevertheless, effective multi-agency working has been identified as a key factor in enabling children and young people to face multiple challenges, particularly for care leavers (Dobel-Ober, 2005; Chase et al, 2008).

A number of areas were identified where multi-agency working could be improved, including between social services and special schools, mainstream schools, and juvenile justice services (Morris, 2005; Blueprint Project, 2005; Hart, 2006). Early evidence suggests that the use of computerised and standardised formats for assessing children's needs via the Integrated Children's System (ICS) is unlikely to have a significant impact on children's satisfaction with social worker tasks or relationships (Bell et al, 2007). Children report wanting information to be shared between agencies on a need-to-know basis (Mainey et al, 2009; Morgan, 2007b).

3. Children's relationship with their social workers

3.1 Contact with social workers

Problems in getting in touch with social workers and social workers not turning up for scheduled meetings are common complaints (Timms and Thoburn, 2003; OFSTED, 2009b). Some children believe that this may be partly attributed to excessive caseloads and that addressing this key problem would make a positive difference to their lives (Blueprint Project, 2005).

Nevertheless, children's views vary about the frequency and nature of the contact they would like to have with social workers. Findings indicate that decisions about the level of contact that children need cannot be prescriptive; rather that the frequency of contact should depend on the needs of the individual child at a particular point in time (Sinclair et al, 2001; OFSTED, 2009c).

Many children reported that frequent change of social worker led to frustration and upset at having to re-tell their stories and difficulties in forming a relationship of trust with their social workers and other professionals (Blueprint Project, 2005). Children tend to confer trust to individuals, and not to particular services or approaches (Mainey et al, 2009). This suggests that while some children may develop a good relationship with their social worker, they may remain mistrustful of social services in general. On the other hand, some children report that social workers can behave in an overly friendly way and that social workers need to strike a better balance between professionalism and friendliness (Marchant et al, 2007).

The need for improved communication skills to enable social workers to engage in more effective direct work with children is a long-standing issue (Ward et al, 2005). This might mean paying more attention to the context in which social workers engage with children, taking more time to build a positive relationship with children, and to treat their views with respect (Thomas 2002; Del Busso 2004, cited in Golding et al, 2006). Children's competence to communicate may be more often a situational than a personal attribute, and may be influenced by physical, cognitive or communication disabilities (Broad et al, 2001; Morris, 2005; Thomas, 2002).

More attention might also be paid in social work training to listening, negotiating and participation in decision-making as a learning process for children (Thomas, 2002). Nevertheless, children report that, while they want to be listened to, they also want tangible results and for social workers to take speedier action on their behalf (Ward et al, 2005; Golding et al, 2006).

3.2   What makes a good social worker?

Overall, studies show that the key characteristics that children look for in a social worker are: a willingness to listen and show empathy; reliability; taking action; respecting confidences, and viewing the child or young person as a whole person and not overly identifying a child with a particular problem (Hill, 1999; Morgan, 2006; Curtis, 2006).

4.   Implications for the training and professional development of social workers

4.1   Children's recommendations

From children's perspectives, improved guidance and training is required to address the support needs and assessment of young carers, young parents in and leaving care, young people in custody, children in special residential schools, and children involved in child protection processes. Training on diverse methods for communicating with children of varying abilities addressing the emotional needs of children at key points in their lives is also required. In relation to multi-agency working, information-sharing protocols need to strike a balance between protecting children's safety and respecting their need for privacy. Children also report wanting social workers to learn about how to deal with young people, family and contact issues for children living away from home, staying healthy and having a good diet, the needs of children with disabilities, housing and benefits, and activities for young people (Curtis, 2006).

4.2   Underpinning principles

The review found that children want social work support that is:

- flexible;
- responsive;
- individualised/personalised;
- respectful of children's views and wishes; and
- participative.

To achieve this, the quality of the relationship between children and their social workers is of key importance. How tensions between social work tasks and relationships might be addressed is therefore of critical importance to children's experience of, and contact with, social workers.

4.3   Possible areas for further research

In relation to the professional development of social workers, it is crucial that lessons are learned from studies conducted over the past decade or so. However, the review also highlighted the need for further research concerning:

- The views of children in kinship care; children in special residential schools; children in custody about their contact with social workers (Morris, 2005; Hart, 2006);
- The vulnerability of young people in and leaving care to sexual exploitation and a lack of appropriate guidance and support to enable professionals to prevent this (Chase et al, 2008);
- Improved social work practice and guidance to address the needs of young parents who are in or leaving care, including young parents with learning difficulties (Chase et al, 2008); and
- The potential for care-experienced young people to be trained as mentors for other young people in care (Chase et al, 2008).

Given the substantial body of research that explores children's views and experiences of their contact with social workers, it may also be considered appropriate to consider focusing future research on the impact of children's views on social work practice, including an exploration of the barriers and facilitators to change in this respect.

1.   Introduction

1.1   Background

Over recent years, there has been a burgeoning interest in children's experiences and perspectives concerning a wide range of issues, including their experience of contact with social workers and other professionals working in children's health and social care (e.g. Franklin and Sloper, 2005; Oliver et al, 2006; Stein, 2009; Thomas, 2002).

This research activity has been prompted by national and international recognition of children's rights to be consulted on matters of concern to them (e.g. under the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1989 Children Act) as well as an increasing policy emphasis on the development of personalised and child-centred services, particularly in relation to services for looked after children, and children considered 'in need' (DCSF, 2008a; DCSF, 2008b). In addition, it is now more widely accepted that services are more likely to be relevant to children and young people if their views and perceptions are actively taken into account (Children Young People Unit, 2001; DCSF, 2008c).

The development of integrated working in children's services - highlighted by the Every Child Matters agenda (DCSF, 2004) and by more recent developments in line with the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007) – are an important aspect of the context in which vulnerable children and young people engage with social workers. Local authorities have integrated children's social care and education services within Children's Services Directorates. Integration is further evidenced in the development of multi-professional teams and of co-located services, most notably through the Children's Centre programme and the development of extended services through schools. Such developments mean that demarcations between education and child welfare services are less clear than used to be the case, and any research concerning children's views about, and experiences of, contact with social workers needs to take these changes into account.

The continued importance attached to integrated working, diversity of provision and a child-centred ethos in the development of children's services have important implications for the initial qualification and continuing professional development of social workers. Without a common language or shared understanding, working in partnership across professional boundaries can present challenges for social workers and other professionals working with vulnerable children and young people and their families (DCSF, 2008b). In response, government policy has promoted the development of a 'common core of skills and knowledge' in the initial training and continuing professional development of a wide range of adults working with children and young people, including social workers (DCSF, 2005; 2008b).

Despite the growth in integrated services, social workers retain specific statutory responsibilities towards children. Although they may work in partnership with other professionals, recent research indicates that, for most children, the social worker is the most important professional in their lives (Stein, 2009). Undertaking assessments of children's needs, developing and allocating resources to packages of care, involving other agencies, reviewing children's progress, and carrying out direct work with children and their families remain key components of the social worker role (albeit not exclusively so).

However, research suggests that there is some tension between the demands of social work tasks (such as assessing needs, and planning services), and the development of skills required for social workers to undertake direct work with children and young people (Stein, 2009).

This review will therefore aim to explore children's reported experiences of contact with social workers in terms of their *relationship* with social workers, as well as their views about social work *tasks*, and the implications of both for initial qualification and continuing professional development in social work.

1.2   Aims

The overall purpose of the review is to inform the Children's Workforce Development Council's (CWDC) current and planned programme of work, including the development of future research in this area.

The main aims of the review were to:

- further develop a review of the literature concerning children's experiences of, and views about, their contact with social workers;[1]
- investigate children's views about social work roles and tasks;
- explore children's views about what makes a 'good' social worker;
- discuss the implications of the findings for the initial qualification and continuing professional development of social workers;
- identify potential areas for further research.

1.3   Methodology

1.3.1 Scope of the review

Within the timescale available for the work, it should be noted that this report comprises a focused, and not a systematic, review of the literature. Rather, the review identified common themes and issues across sources of information, and discusses their implications for the initial and continuing professional development of social workers.

Studies were included which explored children's experience of contact with social workers, including research that had direct and indirect relevance to initial training and continuing professional development in social work. In particular, priority was given to research conducted in the last ten years.

The review included research that addressed the views of children and young people in public care and those considered 'in need', including care leavers. Careful attention was given to ensuring that the views and experiences of children from diverse backgrounds (according to age, gender, ethnicity and disability, for example) were included in the review.

As far as possible, the research also took into account the wide range of settings and contexts in which children and young people engage with social work professionals in order to inform discussions concerning generic as well as specialist social work practice.

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[1] A paper written by Paulo Fuller (undated) for CWDC discussed the findings of five research papers on this issue.

1.3.2 Approach

A staged approach was adopted. The first stage of the work comprised a review of published information concerning children's views and experiences of contact with social work professionals including, where possible, data on their perspectives on what sorts of issues should be addressed in social work training. This stage of the review also took into account peer review comments.

In the second stage, an interim report was prepared to highlight key themes in the literature. Subsequently, a draft final report was prepared as follows. It is understood that this report will be independently peer reviewed, and that this process may entail further discussion or revision prior to publication and dissemination.

1.3.3 Search strategy

Building on the work of an earlier review (Fuller, undated), a scoping of the evidence published during the last ten years (2000-2010) was undertaken. Consideration was given to the inclusion of key texts which fell outside this time period. The review focused on research literature published in peer reviewed journals, as well as 'grey' literature produced by key agencies concerned with the welfare of children and young people in governmental and non-governmental sectors. More specifically, the review methods comprised:

- searches of key databases (ERIC, BEI, IBSS, Research Register for Social Care, NFER, CERUKplus, Google Scholar);

- searches of recent relevant journals (Journal of Social Work, Children and Society, Child and Family Social Work);

- searches of governmental, non-governmental and specialist research agencies (DCSF, Social Exclusion Unit, National Children's Bureau, Centre for Child and Family Research);

- references identified incrementally from journal articles and other publications.

In addition, e-mail contact was made with colleagues at Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) and the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU) at the Institute of Education, University of London, as well as research centres at the Universities of York, Oxford, Loughborough and the University of East Anglia to ensure that the most recent and relevant research in the field was captured.

1.4 Structure of the report

In the first section, background information to the review is set out, together with a description of aims and research methods. This is followed by a section on children's views of social work tasks from the perspectives of children living with their families as well as children living away from home.

Subsequently, children's views and experiences of their relationship with their social workers are discussed. Finally, implications of the findings for the initial qualification and continuing professional development of social workers are explored, and possible areas for future research identified.

2. Children's views of social work tasks

This section of the report examines the different contexts in which children commonly come into contact with social workers, and explores social work tasks from the perspectives of children and young people. It incorporates an investigation of the views and experiences of children living with their families and then moves on to consider the perspectives of children and young people in foster and residential care.

Subsequently, the views of care leavers are explored. At each stage, the implications of children's views and recommendations for the professional development of social workers are discussed.

However, before discussing children's views of social work tasks for children living with their families and those living away from home, it should be remembered that how children are perceived by social workers will have a key impact on social work practice. In the assessing and reviewing of their needs, children consistently express a wish to be treated as individuals (Blueprint, 2005; OFSTED, 2009a; OFSTED, 2009b). Hill (1999) has underlined the importance of understanding that children in contact with social services are 'children with problems, not problem children'.

This might entail social workers treating the child as a 'rounded' human being, rather than as too closely identified with a specific 'problem' or 'disorder' (Hill, 1999). A study by Sandbaek (1999 cited in Hill, 1999), for example, found that children in contact with welfare agencies wanted to talk about many different aspects of their lives, including their interests and achievements, whereas professionals tended to focus on a particular problem or disorder.

2.1 Support for children living with their families

2.1.1 Assessing needs

Children's initial contact with social workers is frequently prompted by the concerns or demands of others, such as parents, teachers or other adults in the child's life. As strangers and as professionals, children tend to treat social workers with caution, and may view their involvement as both stigmatising and disempowering (Hill, 1999; Golding et al, 2006). Children may also be unclear about the social worker's role (Sinclair et al, 2001) and this may be a cause of some confusion. In addition, children, parents and social workers may have different perceptions of the nature of the difficulties facing children and their parents and potentially opposing views about the kinds of support needed.

In such complex circumstances, the importance of clarifying expectations and assumptions has been stressed (Triseliotis et al, 1995a cited in Hill, 1999). Attending to children's expressed needs on the part of the social worker has also been identified as an important corrective to the tendency for adults to dominate decision-making agendas and offer a safeguard against pre-conceived ideas distorting assessment processes (Hill, 1999).

For some children, social work support to families may be effective in protecting children's well-being as well as enabling the family to remain intact. However, within a family support approach, the specific needs of children should not be forgotten. Children have expressed a need for more support for themselves to enable them to continue to live with their families

(Timms and Thoburn, 2003). Indeed, some are openly critical of an over-emphasis on parents' concerns to the exclusion of the child's needs and experiences:

'When I was at home life was very hard for me I was all alone and my family hated me. I had a social worker but you would not think so, she never met up with me, it was always my parents, she never believed anything what I did...and I got called a spoilt brat by her[2].
(Timms and Thoburn, 2003: 29).

2.1.2 Child protection

For some children, contact with social workers will have been prompted by concerns about possible abuse or neglect. However, evidence indicates that children tend to experience child protection assessment processes as confusing and distressing (Cossar and Long, 2008; Laws and Kirby, 2008) and overly concerned with fitting children into adult-oriented procedures (Boylan and Wyllie, 1999 cited in Oliver, 2003). Having their views misrepresented, distorted or only partially conveyed has also emerged as a common cause for complaint (Davidson et al, 2006; Cossar and Long, 2008). Children's fear of the consequences of confiding in their social workers represents a common theme in children's accounts of child protection processes:

'I was too scared of my mum and she was really poorly. …I had been looking after her for about 9 or 10 years…she was really bad then but I couldn't (speak to the social worker) because of how ill she was. I knew that if she got arrested she wouldn't be able to cope'.
(Cossar and Long, 2008: 9)

Children's experiences of Family Group Conferences as a forum for discussing child protection issues have been mixed. On the whole, evidence indicates that children are more likely to participate in Family Group Conferences, compared with the more usual case conference (Ryan, 2004 cited in Laws and Kirby, 2008). However, some children also report finding such procedures, in which their experiences and behaviour are discussed in the wider family network, as potentially humiliating (Laws and Kirby, 2008).

Child protection processes may also result in disappointment for children whose participation may be motivated by a wish to see their parent(s) (Bell and Wilson, 2006). This suggests that, regardless of the form a child protection investigation takes, careful attention should be paid to preparing children about what to expect from child protection processes, and to their impact on the emotional well-being of the child.

Overall, children's experience of child protection processes implies that improved communication skills, particularly empathic listening and questioning skills, on the part of social workers and others are needed to make the assessment process less threatening. Children have expressed appreciation for social workers who go through their report with them prior to a case conference, but this practice has been largely restricted to children who attend case conferences (Cossar and Long, 2008). The support of a trusted adult has also been shown to assist children in participating in meetings (Bell, 2002).

Greater flexibility might also be required in supporting children to decide whether, and how, they might want to participate in meetings (Cossar and Long, 2008). This might include offering

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[2] Please note that spellings in quotes from children appear as in original texts

children options for attending all or part of meetings, and for social workers to go through their report with all children, and not solely those who want to attend meetings.

Evidence also indicates that social workers need to be better trained on current guidance on involving children and young people in assessment processes, to ensure that children are informed about the purpose of meetings, offered support to prepare for them, and are debriefed afterwards (Cossar and Long, 2008). In particular, more attention may need to be given to the support needs of children of different ages, particularly young children.

2.1.3 Children with disabilities

Research consistently shows that the voices of disabled children are particularly vulnerable to being overlooked in social work practice (Knight et al, 2006; Morris, 2005). This is a problem that is shared by disabled children living at home and in residential care (see for example Abbott et al, 2001; Morris, 2005), who may encounter the passive assumption on the part of social workers that they are not capable of expressing their views, or that parents can function as adequate proxies for the voice of the child.

'That is one of the things that really annoys me… being spoken to through my parents. If they want to speak to me, speak to me, not anybody else but me, I won't accept anybody talking to me through anybody else but me...People tend to think that I am a lot less intelligent than I am. That is one of the big problems, a very big problem'.
(Disabled teenager, Audit Commission, 2003)

Children and young people with disabilities have reported that they want professionals to explore their needs by interviewing and observing them (Beresford et al, 2007). In recent years, a number of studies and pilot projects have investigated alternative and augmentative methods for communicating with children with communication impairments, including symbols (Scott and Larcher, 2002) and Talking Mats (Brewster, 2004).

More attention might therefore be given in social work training to learning from this body of knowledge about different methods for communicating with disabled children (see for example, Children's Society/NSPCC, 2001; Knight et al, 2006). Disabled children involved in these latter two studies had a number of recommendations for social workers and other professionals:

- *'we're just like other children';*
- *'take your time and make sure you understand';*
- *'talk directly to us, not just our parents, or our carers';*
- *'don't be scared to ask questions';*
- *'make sure you really understand us because I have seen carers, parents and other people who didn't even know or can't be bothered to find out how we say yes or no. Sometimes people say later, later, because they think we're asking for attention'.*

Improved social work practice might also imply reflecting on common assumptions about the capacity of disabled children to participate in decision-making, and of the importance of a positive and on-going relationship between the social worker and the child for maximising disabled children's capacity to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

2.1.4 Young Carers

Some children considered 'in need' tend to be positioned on the periphery of social work practice. Children caring for parents with severe and enduring mental illness, for example, are rarely recognised as 'in need' according to the 1989 Children Act or assessed under the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995. Research shows that children are often afraid of talking about the nature of their caring responsibilities because they fear the consequences of asking for help for themselves (Aldridge and Becker, 2003).

The extent to which young carers trust their social workers is therefore a key issue. This implies greater sensitivity is required in exploring children's views and their needs for support so that they might be allowed to choose whether or not they wish to continue caring for a parent (Aldridge and Becker, 2003). Social work interventions that respect children's choices and offer flexible support are likely to be well-received by young carers.

2.2   Children and young people in care

2.2.1 Transition into care

Unresolved differences of opinion between parents and social workers about how best to care for children (for example, a parent may press for their child to be admitted into care and the social worker may resist such demands, or vice versa) may increase the likelihood of an emergency admission into care (Hill, 1999). This turn of events can be traumatic for children and reduce their scope for exercising choice of placement (Blueprint, 2005).

Children's entry into care in this way has been attributed to a tendency for social workers to perceive entry into care as a last resort, rather than a service to families (Packman and Hall 1998, cited in Aldgate and Statham, 2001; Blueprint, 2005). However, this approach is by no means universal; evidence indicates that entry into care may be a planned process that allows children to exercise more choice of placement (Aldgate and Statham, 2001). While children's safety is obviously a key priority, the messages from children are clear that they want a major say in discussions and decision-making before they are placed away from their parents (OFSTED 2009b).

Research has shown that many children are relieved to be 'looked after' because it meant they were removed from abusive situations (Ward et al, 2005). However, although children may not wish to stay in an unsafe situation, separation from parents and other family members can also produce powerful feelings of sadness, anxiety, homesickness, uncertainty and grief (Blueprint, 2005; Timms and Thoburn, 2003).

'I felt sad when I left my family. The feeling was like having a solid block of ice inside me...when all the ice has melted, I will be ready for a new family'.
(Thomas et al, 1999 cited in Golding et al, 2006:15).

Feelings associated with loss and separation are likely to have an impact on children's subsequent behaviour and emotional well-being in their placement (Timms and Thoburn, 2003). Improved social work support to children might therefore mean putting more time into preparing children for entry into care and supporting them through the process. Lack of planning and support has particular consequences for unaccompanied children seeking asylum, who may feel particularly isolated and confused:

'No one tells you all the things you need to know, to explain things to you like where to find a doctor, transport, how things work here'.
(Blueprint Project, 2005:15).

The need for clear communication throughout the assessment and admission process emerged as a key theme in children's accounts of their entry into care. Children would like information to be given to them verbally and in writing during and following the upheaval of admission (Blueprint, 2005).

Children would also like social workers to give them more time and attention at the time. In particular, they would like social workers to spend some time with them after taking them to their placement (Sinclair et al, 2001). However, many children are aware that their need for more support often competes with other demands on social workers' time (such as completing an assessment, locating an appropriate placement, liaising with other agencies).

From children's perspective, more resources are needed to support social workers so that they can spend more time with children during their transition into care (Blueprint, 2005). These additional resources, which they suggest may be achieved via the recruitment of more social work assistants, may also assist social workers to approach assessments of children's needs in a less routine and more child-friendly way, allowing closer attention to be given to eliciting children's wishes and feelings.

2.2.2 Making a Placement

Children report that the decisions social workers make about their living arrangements has a big impact on their lives and that, as a result, they want to have more of a say in decision-making, to have a choice of placement, and to be informed about what decisions are made and why (OFSTED, 2009a; Golding et al, 2006). Children subject to court proceedings also want to be better informed so that they can participate in decisions about their care (Timms and Thoburn, 2003).

In a survey of looked after children, (OFSTED, 2009a) just under two thirds of children who knew they had a care plan reported that they had had a say in what was planned for them. These findings are a substantial improvement on the findings of other research, which reported that 65% of children surveyed (n=417) had not contributed to the development of their care plan (Timms and Thoburn, 2003). OFSTED's survey (2009a) also found that some children were more likely than others to be involved in their care plan. Children living with their family, for example, had less influence on their care plan than other children.

Barriers to participation

While findings indicate that most children felt that they had had a say in their care plan and were in agreement with its contents, research also shows that many children find planning meetings and reviews alienating, intimidating and as inhibiting of their participation (Thomas, 2002; Thomas 2005).

'You're so nervous. It feels like the whole world's staring at you and you feel so inferior to them'.
(McLeod, 2006:45)

In a study of disabled children's experiences of residential special schools, Abbott and colleagues (2000) found that children were rarely consulted during the course of making placements or when reviews were carried out. Most young people were not sure of their purpose and perceived review meetings as occasions to be endured.

'It's hard to explain to everyone in front of a group'.
(Abbott et al, 2000:70)

While there is evidence of positive work in eliciting the views and feelings of disabled children in residential care (Abbott et al, 2000; Children's Society/NSPCC, 2001), in general insufficient attention is given to views and feelings of disabled children in these settings (Morris, 2005).

This is of particular concern given that disabled children in residential care are often physically and socially isolated, receive intimate care from large numbers of people, and their communication or cognitive impairments can make disclosure of abuse difficult (Morris 1999, 2003 both cited in Morris, 2005). Improved social work practice might entail more training for social workers to develop skills in communicating with children with disabilities, and for more attention to be given to obtaining disabled children's perspectives on their needs (Abbott et al, 2001; Morris, 2005).

Other children who tend to be less likely to be asked about their views and feelings include privately fostered children and children in kinship care (Broad et al, 2001; Morris, 2005), and children in youth custody (Hart, 2006). Recent research on kinship care found that social workers tended to be peripheral to children's lives, even for those on care orders (Hunt et al, 2008). Children in youth custody also risk being marginalised from social work practice and report feeling 'forgotten' by social services (Hart, 2006).

Evidence indicates that social workers are less likely to be invited to planning meetings of children in custody, even though social workers are regarded by children as having an important role in their lives, particularly in relation to sorting out financial problems, clothing allowances, and family difficulties. Some young people reported that social workers seemed to disappear from their lives as soon as they entered custody. Most children were not sure whether they had a care plan or not, and speculated that this was 'because you're in prison and they've got care of you now' (Hart, 2006:1). For some young people, loss of contact with their social worker was a source of anxiety and sadness; it also created difficulties in meeting their everyday material needs:

'I told him I wanted to see him - even just to say goodbye – but he hasn't come'.
(Hart, 2006:7)

'I reckon they should support them as much as they can – send them postal orders so they can buy things – biscuits, shower gel – little things that help. They were meant to send £8 per week – they only sent it once'.
(Hart, 2006:7)

Placement 'fit' and choice

Whether children are fostered, placed in residential care, adopted or cared for by kin, children's well-being is influenced to a large extent by the extent to which a good 'fit' is achieved between

the child and his or her carers. A study by Sinclair and colleagues (2001:22) found that one young woman appreciated that her social worker had tried 'so hard to get me the right family every time I did not like my placement'. By contrast another's request was for social services to move her from her current placement: 'can you move me soon please?'

In a recent survey of looked after children, a majority (81%) felt that they were in the right placement; one in ten reported that they were not in the right placement, and a similar proportion (9%) were not sure. Children in foster care were more likely to say they were in the right placement (90%) compared with children in residential units (57%). Young people who said that they were in the right placement said that this was because they were happy and settled, safe and well looked after, and that their carers were kind and supportive. Not getting on with someone in their placement or just not liking the place were the main reasons why young people were dissatisfied with their placement (OSTED 2009a).

A further factor that contributes to children's satisfaction with their placement concerns the extent to which siblings are placed together. Findings from a recent survey showed that nearly two thirds (63%) of looked after children who participated had brothers or sisters who were also in care. Of these, just under a quarter (24%) had their siblings living with them in the same placement but, in the majority of cases (76%), siblings lived in different placements (OSTED 2009a). Of those separated, just under half (46%) disagreed with the decision to place their sibling(s) in a different placement. However, just over a third (34%) thought it was right they had been separated and a fifth (20%) were not sure. Findings indicate that most but not all children want to be placed together. This implies that individual children's views and feelings should always be taken into account.

'I think sisters and brothers should not be split up and you could see your mum and dad as much as you could.'
(Timms and Thoburn, 2003:20)

Some children have reported that achieving a better 'fit' between children and their carers might require treating the placement initially as a trial period, providing an opportunity for both sides to make a choice (Sinclair et al, 2001; OFSTED 2009b). Offering children a choice of placement, including giving serious consideration to placing children with family members or a family friend, have also been suggested (Sinclair et al 2001; OFSTED, 2009b). Respect for children's choices might also mean allowing a child to remain in a placement, even if this might challenge social work practice:

'My old placement, I liked them very much. I wanted to stay there…And the stupid social worker said that because I'm mixed race and the carers were white that I had to go to someone who was black…If I was the social worker, I'd say, 'you can stay wherever you're happy', but she's (the social worker) got to be so stressful'.
(John, age 10, in Oliver, 2008: 194)

In addition to finding a placement where children can feel happy and settled, some children have also commented that they would like their social workers to be more efficient and diligent about following through on agreed action. This might entail social workers focusing on reducing delays, doing what was promised so that the uncertainty can be reduced:

'to be more organised, to get their act together, for example, review and planning meetings. Not having these means I don't know where I am going to be'.

(Sinclair et al, 2001:23).

Placement moves

In recent years, attempts have been made to limit the number of placement moves experienced by children and young people. Many children in care report that repeated moves can create difficulties in establishing a positive relationship with their carers, disrupt their education and friendship networks, foster feelings of powerlessness and insecurity and make it difficult to maintain contact with family and friends (OFSTED 2009a, 2009b; Sinclair et al, 2001). Some young people have attributed their placement moves to budgetary concerns, rather than concern for their well-being (McLeod, 2006; OFSTED 2009a; Oliver, 2008).

' *I think it (the move to a new children's home) was because it was cheaper. Because I was in full-time education where I was, and I wasn't involved with any police or anything. And now I don't have any education'.*
(Oliver et al, 2006:9)

Repeated moves are also reported by young people to have an impact on their behaviour and emotional well-being in care.

'Sometimes because I hated being moved about not knowing where I was going next and who these people were so sometimes it was quite scary and upsetting as I could never settle down and was always playing up at school and at home'.
(Timms and Thoburn, 2003: 21).

'Every time you move you feel rejected and this affects your self-esteem and confidence'.
(Barnardo's 2007, cited in Mainey et al, 2009:9).

However, evidence indicates that, while looked after children want more stability in their lives, their overriding concern is to be happy in their placement (Sinclair et al, 2001; OFSTED, 2009a). It would appear to be *unwanted* moves that create the most distress and discontent. It follows naturally, therefore, that children would like to be moved if they are unhappy in their placement, and may want to remain in a placement when a social worker might want to move them.

In a recent survey, children identified a reduction in repeated moves as a key priority, with the proviso that a placement move might be advisable if children will be happier, safer or gain access to better services as a result (OFSTED, 2009a). In a recent survey, 68% of looked after children said that their last placement move was for the better (OFSTED, 2009a). While a majority were therefore happy with their placement move, overall, evidence suggests that more flexibility may be needed in social work practice to allow children to stay in a placement of their choice (OSTED 2009a; Sinclair et al 2001). This might mean allowing children to stay in short-term foster care, or to consider allowing children to live with a friend, teacher or former foster carer, if they express a wish to do so and where both sides are amenable to the arrangement (Sinclair et al, 2001).

For some children, the common assumption in social work practice that children should be returned at some point to birth family may contribute to their insecurity and instability. Concerns have frequently been expressed about the vulnerability of young people who are returned prematurely to their family because of reluctance on the part of social services to retain them in

care or accommodation (Ward et al, 2005). Children's recommendations for social workers on this issue are that they should ensure that children are happy about returning to their parents and that it is safe to do so, and that children's happiness and safety should be the main criteria for removing them again, if necessary (OFSTED, 2009c).

'Go back to your parents when the child and the parents know they are ready and probably have a regular social worker coming around to see how things are getting on'.
(Timms and Thoburn, 2003:107)

2.2.3 Schools

There has been a general trend in recent years in favour of reducing disruptions to looked after children's education as a result of placement moves. In a recent survey, children who were unhappy with the move to a new school, reported that they had not been consulted, or that they thought the move was unnecessary, or that they had lost friends as a result (OFSTED, 2009a). In particular, children have advised that secondary school pupils should not be moved prior to examinations (OFSTED, 2009b). However, not all children objected to moving schools. Findings show that a small majority (54%) considered their move to a new school was in their best interests (OFSTED, 2009a). Their main reasons for welcoming the move were that the school was nearer to home or that they liked the school better.

Research indicates that, overall, children tend to have mixed views about social work support for their education. Some children have expressed appreciation for social workers who prioritised their education (Mainey et. al., 2009), while others have expressed dissatisfaction (Barnardo's, 2006). Education and support services for children excluded from school or awaiting a school place following changes in care placements have been identified as a particular gap in provision (Morgan 2007b). Overall, children want social workers to discuss school moves with them (Morgan, 2007b). Children in boarding schools also expressed a need for quicker responses from social workers regarding enquiries about funding or in relation to obtaining their permission for activities, such as school trips (Morgan 2007b).

In terms of children's everyday lives in school, the need for social workers to avoid making assumptions about children's support needs at school has been highlighted.   Children in care may want someone they can speak to at school if they have a problem but children report that help offered should be what the child needs (OFSTED, 2009c). In particular, social workers have been advised against 'turning schools into a local branch of social services' – that is, having meetings in lunch breaks and removing children from lessons and other activities (Sinclair et al, 2001:24). Such social work interventions may expose the child to stigmatising attitudes and behaviour from their peers.

2.2.4 Contact with family

For many looked after children, contact with their birth family is a burning issue (OFSTED, 2009a, 2009b). Although birth families may have contributed to difficulties in children's lives, they may also generate feelings of loyalty (Hill, 1999). Findings from a survey of looked after children (Timms and Thoburn, 2003) found that over half reported that they did not see enough

of their father, and more than a third did not see enough of their mother; a third did not see enough of their siblings and nearly half did not see enough of other family members, including grandparents. In addition, over half of study participants said they did not see enough of former foster carers who were important to them, and a quarter did not see enough of friends.

However, it should also be acknowledged that contact with family members can be stressful and damaging, as well as desirable (Sinclair et al, 2001). Research shows that most children want some form of contact with their birth families, but that the form and frequency that such contact takes may vary widely according to the wishes of the individual child (e.g. telephone contact, or face-to-face). Some children will not want any contact with some or all of their birth family (Sinclair et al, 2001).

Contact with parents may also contribute to tensions between carers and parents, and children may feel caught in the middle of the conflict (Oliver et al, 2006 cited in Stein, 2009). Where social workers attend carefully to children's views, they tend to be in a better position to negotiate contact arrangements that are acceptable to both sides. Reducing such conflict can have unanticipated benefits for children, such as improved educational attainment (Oliver et al, 2006 cited in Stein, 2009).

The implications of these findings for social workers are that they may need to treat children's feelings about their contact with birth families more seriously, and respect their views about the frequency and nature of contact. Social workers should avoid 'rules of thumb' when it comes to contact issues and listen carefully to children's views and wishes, but recognise that they may need to intervene to prevent contact, change its nature or work on the relationships involved, as required (Sinclair et al, 2001).

2.2.5 Leaving care

The views and experiences of young care leavers echo many of the themes raised by younger children in the care system. A key factor concerns the extent to which social workers prepare young people for leaving care, and support them in their transition to independence.

Research has shown that young people leaving care continue to be less involved in education, training or employment and are more vulnerable to poor life chances and social exclusion in later life (Allen, 2003). Recent survey findings showed that over a third of care leavers were not in education, employment or training (OFSTED, 2009a). Studies also show that social work and other support services for care leavers are highly variable, with some local authorities providing integrated services across a range of agencies, and others offering little in the way of support (Chase et al, 2008).

However, overall, a majority of care leavers rated the support they received as good or very good (OFSTED, 2009a). Many social workers were appreciated for the help they provided with finding accommodation, dealing with benefits and in discussing plans for education, training and employment (Allen, 2003). However, other care leavers, including disabled young people, have reported a need for improved practical and emotional support across all of these issues (Barn et al, 2005; Blueprint Project, 2005; OFSTED 2009b, Lewis et al, 2007).

'*They are good if you ask for help and something gets done about it. Many social workers say they will do things but don't come up with the goods*'.
 (Allen, 2003: 23).

'But in terms of helping me to budget and manage money and all that, I didn't really have much support.' (Barn et al, 2005: 69)

Care leavers have identified a need for more after-care support services (Morgan, 2007b). Barn and colleagues' study of care leavers (2005) found they had had minimal input into pathway planning on leaving care. Care leavers have also reported needing more support for maintaining and extending their social networks of support, and in accessing support services for parents, Connexions, childcare services, mentoring services (Allen, 2003; Chase et al, 2008;Tryer et al, 2005). Support that is offered in a more informal and relationship-oriented way is also more in accordance with care leavers expressed preferences (Allen, 2003). As in other aspects of their care, young care leavers would like more flexibility and choice:

''I'm coming out of care and you're saying to me that if I turn that place down you're not going to give me nothing else……The whole place stank, it took me months to get the smell out. There was cockroach droppings all over the linen closet, everything…it was horrible and they (social services) refused to help me.'
(Barn et al, 2005: 35)

To improve the social and emotional support available to care leavers, the importance of individualised responses, that would include making the transition from care happen only when the young person is ready, rather than at a pre-set age, has been stressed (Morgan, 2007a; 2007b). It might also mean offering additional social work support to enable young people to adjust emotionally to leaving care (Allen, 2003). Young people have also suggested that other young people with a background in care could be trained as mentors (Chase et al, 2008). More broadly, developing support services that are flexible, targeted, co-ordinated across a range of agencies, and geared at the pace at which the young person is able to engage with their future employment, education and training options, is needed (Allen, 2003).

On a practical level, responding to care leavers views might mean: providing financial support to enable young people to remain in care until they feel ready to leave (OFSTED, 2009a); linking care leavers with a range of other relevant services to maximise their networks of support; and ensuring care leavers, including young parents, are fully informed of their entitlements to benefits and financial support.

Young Parents

Recent studies show that improving access and support services for looked after young parents in their transition to independence is a key issue. Many of the themes that run through children's accounts of their contact with social workers continue into their after care experiences, including a lack of access to social workers, and a fear that asking for help might be interpreted as an inability to cope as a parent.

'The more you ask social services for care and support, the more they are querying your parenting skills.'
(Chase et al, 2008).

Young parents report that the availability of appropriate housing is a key issue for them, including for young fathers who in general appear to be invisible to social workers:

'My baby is due in three months, so how am I going to live in a single person's night shelter? They (social services) have said that if I am still living there when the baby is born that it will be taken off me...that's your answer to that?'
(Chase et al, 2008)

Young parents also reported a tendency for social workers to scrutinise care leaver's parenting capacities through the lens of child protection, rather than assessing their needs for support. Child protection assessments were commonly experienced as confusing, intimidating and disempowering, with some young parents complaining that social workers tended to appear on the scene just before the birth of their child in an almost predatory manner (Chase et al, 2008).

Findings indicate that more attention could be paid to training social workers to sensitise them to the impact of past care experiences on care leavers' adult relationships and parenting. Training to allow social workers to reflect critically on their attitudes to young parents might also be appropriate (Chase et al, 2008). In particular, evidence indicates that better and more supportive assessments of the support needs of young parents, including young fathers, who are in or leaving care is warranted. Social work practice in relation to pre- and post-birth assessments of looked after young parents should be reviewed to develop a less threatening and more supportive process.

2.2.6 Multi-agency working

The policy drive in support of integrated working provides an important and new context for exploring children's views about social work tasks and relationships. Recent research indicates that, while many different professionals may have a role in their lives, children continue to view their social worker as the most important (Stein, 2009).

For some children and young people, such as some care leavers (Chase et al, 2008), effective multi-agency working has been identified as a key factor in enabling them to face multiple challenges. Social workers have also been shown to have a key role to play in supporting looked after children to obtain access to health services, including access to sexual health clinics (Dobel-Ober, 2005).

However, evidence also indicates that some children are disadvantaged by a lack of effective co-ordination or action between social services and other agencies. Liaison between social services and education services, for example, appears to work less well for children in special schools (Morris, 2005) and also for some looked after children in mainstream schools who have identified a need for education and social services to resolve problems more quickly (Blueprint Project, 2005).

Young people in custody have also described their frustration at the 'over to you' culture between youth justice and social services that tended to result in a pattern of fragmented services, particularly for young people leaving custody (Hart, 2006). In general, evidence indicates that children want better communication between professionals and more support with moving between services and using multiple services without having to tell their story several times (Mainey et al, 2009).

In recent years, there has been a move towards the introduction of an Integrated Children's System (ICS). However, early evidence suggests that multi-agency working that is characterised by a focus on the use of computerised and standardised formats for assessing

children's needs is unlikely to make a significant difference to children's satisfaction with social worker tasks or relationships. For example, a recent evaluation of the Integrated Children's System in pilot areas found that children were mostly unaware of the system, and that it was their relationship with their social worker that was most important to them. Children also worried about possible breaches to their confidentiality and wanted their records to be secure and only shared with relevant people (Bell et al, 2007).

Children's concerns about confidentiality are also echoed in other studies on multi-agency working. They have frequently expressed frustration at having lots of professionals involved in their lives and want information to be shared between professionals on a 'need to know' basis (Mainey et al, 2009; Morgan 2007b). Some children thought that social workers already had access to too much information (Morgan, 2007b).

Taking account of children's concerns in this respect might entail a social worker undertaking a risk assessment to determine potential benefits or harm before sharing information with other agencies (Morgan, 2007a). This requires careful handling to ensure that information is not withheld from agencies that have responsibilities for keeping children safe, but is also important to children's rights.

3.   Children's relationship with their social workers

In the previous section, children's views and experience of key tasks in social work practice were investigated. A key theme in children's accounts concerned their desire to be actively listened to, to participate in decision-making, and for prompt action to be taken on their behalf when necessary. An important factor in determining the extent to which children's wishes in this respect may be satisfied or not concerns their nature and the quality of their relationship with social workers.

3.1   Contact with social workers

3.1.1 Access

Although a recent survey showed that the majority of looked after children had a social worker allocated to them (91%), children frequently report difficulties in gaining access to their social worker when they need to (OFSTED, 2009b). Problems in getting in touch with social workers by telephone, failure to return calls, and not turning up for scheduled meetings are common complaints (OFSTED 2009b; Timms and Thoburn, 2003). These barriers to contact can be frustrating to children who may feel that their needs are pressing. Some children have also observed that, by contrast, when social workers wanted to see children, this tended to happen quickly (OFSTED, 2009b).

'The way no one seems to have time. 'Can I ring you back there's a crisis'. 'Let me finish these reports'.
(Timms and Thoburn, 2003: 17)

'I would like social workers to be a bit more alert and to hear what foster carers have to say and when they put down a time to come and see you they must try to make the effort to come'.
(Timms and Thoburn, 2003: 16).

Ease of access and continuity of contact may help to reassure children that social workers are 'there for them' (Hill, 1999). Some social workers have responded to this need by giving children their mobile telephone number and children have said that this has helped (OFSTED, 2009b). Despite their difficulties in gaining access to their social worker, some children are also sympathetic to the pressures that social workers are under. Some children report that social workers' are overworked and that addressing this key problem would make a positive difference to their lives:

'Social workers should be nice, available and they should have less children to work with and should learn what it's like to be in care'.
(Blueprint Project, 2005:6)

3.1.2 Frequency and nature of contact

Children's views vary about the frequency and nature of the contact they would like to have with their social worker. Some wanted more regular contact than they received, or want social workers to spend more time with them when they do visit (OFSTED, 2009b). Other children may experience visits from their social worker as overly intrusive. For example, one child advised her social worker:

'…not to come too often and NOT to keep asking if I am happy where I am. If I were not happy, I could phone them at any time. My foster parents love me and I love it here'.
(Sinclair et al, 2001: 22)

Children's needs for contact with their social worker also tend to fluctuate over time, e.g. during entry into care, leaving care, or at particularly stressful times. Children may need extra visits if there are problems, or a change in plan, or if the child is unhappy, in danger or misbehaving (OFSTED, 2009c).

However, meeting children's needs in this respect implies that children should be able to contact their social worker more easily outside of regular visits and that more needs to be done to address this issue (OFSTED, 2009c). Findings indicate that decisions about the level of contact that children need cannot be prescriptive; rather that the frequency of contact should depend on the individual child at a particular point in time.

Some children may also want to see their social worker on their own. Asking children how they are getting on in the presence of a carer could inhibit their willingness to be honest and direct about their feelings (OFSTED, 2009b). It might also make it difficult for children to challenge their foster carers' accounts of the child's behaviour (Sinclair et al, 2001).

'Social workers usually ask if it's alright for the foster parent to stay while you talk and when you're with them you can't really say you would mind because then you might hurt their feelings mostly when they're like your parents!'
(Timms and Thoburn, 2003: 17)

3.1.3 Building a relationship

Attachment theory has played an important role in providing social work practice with a rationale and model for working with children (Bowlby, 1973). It may come as little surprise therefore, that children who have experienced loss or fragmented relationships with their birth family, should look for continuity of contact with other adults in their lives, including social workers. In many studies, children give voice to their need for fewer changes in social worker (Barn et al, 2005; Barnardos 2006; CSCI, 2007; OFSTED 2009a; Mainey et al, 2009).

'I have been in foster care for 3 years and in that time I have had 9 social workers I would like to have a social worker which stays long can you help.'
*(*Timms and Thoburn, 2003:17)

Many children report that repeated changes in social worker frequently led to frustration and upset at having to re-tell their stories on a number of occasions, including times when they were trying to move on from their past experiences.

'They (social workers) should make an effort to meet you and know your files so you don't have to explain things all over again, it may be upsetting for young children'.
(Blueprint Project, 2005: 6).

Too many rules and regulations were also identified as having a negative impact on the relationship (Blueprint Project, 2005).

'Some social workers take the paperwork too seriously, but some are genuine and take time to support you. One worker acted more like a friend and that made it easier to talk to him '
(Tryer et al, 2005:1117)

Without a relationship of trust in their social workers and other professionals, children are less likely to discuss issues openly with them (Graham et al 2007; White et al, 2008 both cited in Mainey et al, 2009) and the potentially therapeutic role of social work (asking about feelings, exploring the past and plans for the future) is likely to be constrained.

'Social workers are sometimes very judgemental and do not realise how scared, vulnerable and nervous it feels to be in care. Why should I let some one else know my feelings and thoughts? And subsequently the reaction comes out the wrong way – anger, bad behaviour...'
(Allen, 2003: 26)

Research shows that children are more likely to confer trust when their confidentiality is respected (Mainey et al, 2009) and that children tend to confer trust to individual practitioners, and not to particular services or approaches (Sandbaek, 1999 cited in Hill, 1999; Hart, 2006). This suggests that while some children may develop a good relationship with their social worker, they remain mistrustful of social services in general (Farnfield, 1998 cited in Hill, 1999).

Some children describe positive relationships with their social workers that combine friendliness, with the provision of appropriate emotional and practical support. In this context, it is not uncommon for children to describe their social worker as a 'friend'.

'We were friends. She was there for me when I needed her help. She also left me alone to be able to fend for myself and to get on with things. But the main thing was that the support was there when it was needed'.
(Ward et al, 2005: 14)

However, for others, the social work relationship erred on the wrong side of friendliness, towards an inversion of the helping role. This suggests that building up a positive relationship with children involves considerable sensitivity in managing the boundaries between professionalism and friendliness (Mainey et al, 2009) and that, for some children, social workers can behave in an inappropriate way:

'This is the biggest problem of my life...they're willing to come talk to you, tell you about all their problems. To me that's cool, but then they get the idea we're best buddies. They've got their job to do and I'm trying to love my life..I don't know what their game is. They're not my friends – they have nothing to do with my life'. (Marchant et al, 2007: 28).

3.1.4 Communication skills

Good communications skills have been identified as a key factor in facilitating, or blocking, the development of a positive relationship between children and their social workers, and in the completion of key social work tasks. Children tend to dislike social workers who 'nag' them, talk down to them, are 'boring', or make quick assumptions about them (Triseliotis et al 1995a; Baldry and Kemmis 1996; Farnfield 1998 all cited in Hill, 1999). Conversely, children tend to rate highly the capacity for social workers to listen and to communicate with them at an appropriate level (Ward et al, 2005).

'not too adult, and not using street talk which just sounds stupid.'
(OFSTED 2009b)

'I really didn't like her…'cos every time I tried talking to her, she always butted in. Wouldn't let me talk'.
(Ward et al, 2005: 14)

The need for improved communication skills to enable social workers to engage in more effective direct work with children is a long-standing issue (Ward et al, 2005). This might mean paying more attention to the context in which social workers engage with children, including the power relations at play (Golding et al, 2006; Thomas, 2005). It might also mean taking more time to develop a relationship with children and to treat their views with respect (Del Busso, 2004 cited in Golding et al, 2006). Time might also be spent getting to know young people and finding out about their concerns prior to meetings, and developing strategies to enable children's concerns and agendas to be explored during the meeting itself (Thomas, 2002).

Sensitivity to children's previous experiences, the place of the interview, and the attitude of the interviewer have also been identified as key elements in facilitating good communication (Golding et al, 2006). Exploring the capacity of the individual child and the support they may need to communicate more effectively have also been highlighted as important factors, taking into account that competence may be more often a situational than a personal attribute (Thomas, 2005), and may be influenced by physical, cognitive or communication disabilities (Broad et al, 2001; Morris, 2005, Knight et al, 2006). Children and young people seeking asylum might also be expected to feel confusion and some suspicion, and they may be reluctant to talk about their experiences at first (Wade et al, 2005). If treated with sensitivity, children seeking asylum may open up more to their social worker and consequently, initial assessments may need to be reviewed as new information emerges (Wade et al, 2005).

Equally important for social work practice might be a greater appreciation that children learn to take part in decisions (Thomas, 2002) and that listening, negotiating and participating in decision-making can have potentially empowering effects:

'the social worker I have now is good, she helps me help myself, helps me learn to do things myself'.
(Blueprint Project, 2005: 10)

3.1.5 Taking action

While good communication skills are key to effective social work practice, the previous chapter shows that children also value social workers who take action and are prepared to advocate for them (Golding et al, 2006; Ward et al, 2005). Children report that they do not just want to be listened to; they also want tangible results and often for speedier action to be taken on their behalf, such as obtaining a national insurance number or a laptop computer for example (OFSTED 2009b).

'I nicknamed my social worker 'after' as he always tries to help after someone else has already done it'. (Curtis, 2006:9)

This implies that, from children's perspectives, a good social worker is one who can provide both emotional *and* practical support in a timely way.

3.2   What makes a good social worker?

A number of different studies have identified the main characteristics of what makes a good social worker, from the child's point of view (Aldgate and Statham, 2001; Morgan, 2006; Curtis, 2006; Hill, 1999). Overall, children's comments highlight a range of different competencies and personal qualities that, taken together, provide the necessary foundation for enabling social workers to provide appropriate emotional and practical support in a way that is acceptable to the child.

Hill (1999) summarised the key characteristics that children look for in a social worker as follows:

- willingness to listen and show empathy;
- reliability (keeping promises, being available, punctuality);
- taking action (addressing practical problems and material needs);
- respecting confidences

To these four factors, a fifth might be added (Aldgate and Statham, 2001):

- viewing the child or young person as a whole person (talking about things other than problems of family life).

Conversely, a poor social worker was identified (Morgan, 2006) as someone who:

- does not listen properly';
- does not speak to children and young people in private;
- speaks to and believes what adults (such as carers) tell them rather than listening to the child;
- does not do what they promised to do;
- turns up late;
- has too much power over children's lives;
- does not share information with new social worker allocated;
- ignores the views of very young children.

Taken together, these negative characteristics might be interpreted as those that are discounting of the child – their views, their needs for privacy, their time, their autonomy and their capacities.

4.   Implications for the professional development of social workers

'Listen to us, check if we need anything, help us to stay in contact with our family, keep us safe, remember we are people'.
(OFSTED, 2009b)

This chapter summarises areas highlighted as requiring further attention in the training and professional development of social workers. This is followed by more specific suggestions about how the social work training curriculum might be improved. Subsequently, the relevance of the review's findings to the development of underpinning principles of effective social work practice with children and young people is discussed. Finally, some gaps in research are identified.

4.1   Children and young people's recommendations

Hitherto, each section in this report has highlighted specific suggestions for ways in which social workers might improve their direct work with children considered 'in need', looked after children and young people and care leavers. It would be important for these recommendations to be addressed in the initial and continuing professional development of social workers and, more importantly, in their everyday practice. These include improved guidance and training on:

- the support needs and assessment of young carers; young parents in and leaving care; and young people in custody;
- Social workers' responsibilities to children in special residential schools;
- communication skills, including greater awareness of diverse methods for communicating with disabled children;
- information sharing on the basis of a 'need to know' principle;
- on meeting the emotional needs of children at key points in their lives e.g., on transition into care, and on leaving care;
- involving children in child protection processes; and
- facilitating children's participation more broadly in decisions about their care.

In relation to the initial and continuing professional development of social workers (Curtis, 2006), children have suggested that children and young people should work alongside social work trainees to provide advice from their personal experiences. It has also been suggested that social workers gain experience during their initial training of direct work with children on a daily basis, rather than via blocks of training. Setting time aside for on-going training has also been identified as an important requirement for social workers with respect to their professional development.

More specifically, they also suggest (Curtis, 2006) that the training curriculum should address the following key issues (in descending order of importance):

- How young people are likely to feel about things
- Training in how to deal with young people
- Family and contact issues for those living away from home
- Staying healthy and having a good diet

- How to be friendly and approachable to young people
- Disabilities and the needs of children with disabilities
- Activities for young people
- Not to make a young person talk to you if they don't want to
- Housing and benefits

4.2   Underpinning principles

In 1997, a report by Sir William Utting, entitled 'People Like Us', reviewed the safeguards for children living away from home. Over a decade later, findings of this review indicate that Utting's observations and aspirations continue to have relevance for the social workers and other professionals who work with children and young people. The report commented on children's accounts of their lives in care which is worth quoting at length:

'The common theme… was that their very reasonable desire to be treated as people and as individuals… and the reality that local authorities needed much more than good intentions to achieve this. These young people had the potential to contribute to overcoming the difficulties they and their contemporaries face…their ability gives us a great deal of confidence that looked after children can not only share decisions about their own future as individuals but also contribute to the better working of the systems that govern their lives. Children who are or have been looked after by local authorities can offer advice on policy and service developments and assist in the training and selection of staff'.
(Stuart and Baines, 2004: 51).

Research conducted over more than a decade (Allen, 2003; OFSTED, 2009a, 2009b; Morris, 2005; Sinclair et al, 2001) has highlighted a number of key themes in children's views and experiences of social workers and the care system. Children report wanting:

- respect for their individuality;
- more of a say in care planning, including education;
- more influence over decisions about contact with their families;
- easier access to social workers when they need to see them;
- to be treated the same as other children, and not to be made to stand out from their peers as a child in care.

Taken together, these themes contribute in their different ways to children's expressed wish for an 'ordinary life' (Marchant et al 2007; Mainey et al 2009; Sinclair et al, 2001; Ward et al, 2005).

This review found that children had many practical suggestions to make about how the training and professional development of social workers could be improved. At the same time, evidence indicates that it is not always possible, nor desirable, to be prescriptive in terms of how social workers may best respond to children's views and wishes (Sinclair et al, 2001).

Nevertheless, from children's accounts of their contact with social workers, it is possible to identify a number of principles for guiding improved social work practice in terms of tasks and social work relationships. This review echoes other studies which show that children want social work support that is:

- flexible (including enabling children to exercise choice)

- responsive;
- individualised/personalised;
- respectful of children's views and wishes; and
- participative

To achieve this, the quality of the relationship between children and their social workers is of key importance. Findings from this review suggest that the distinction between social work tasks and relationships with children is a false dichotomy; children tend to view 'paperwork' and other procedural aspects of social work tasks as inhibiting of their wish to be heard and treated as individuals.

Conversely, the quality of the relationship between children and social workers is likely to have an impact on the capacity of the social worker to undertake core assessments and other social work tasks in a comprehensive and balanced way. How tensions between social work tasks and relationships might be addressed is therefore of critical importance to children's experience of, and contact with, social workers.

4.3 Possible areas for further research

A considerable amount of research has been undertaken in recent years that focuses on 'listening' to children and young people about their views and experiences as service users. However, evidence shows that listening is not enough; children also want action to be taken in response to their views and experiences (Golding et al, 2006).

In relation to the professional development of social workers, it is crucial that lessons are learned from studies conducted over the past decade or so, rather than to direct efforts towards the support for research that duplicates or confirms what is already known.

Studies included in the review have highlighted a number of gaps in research, including:

- The views of the following groups of children about their contact with social workers: children in kinship care; children in special residential schools; children in custody (Morris, 2005; Hart, 2006);

- The vulnerability of young people in and leaving care to sexual exploitation and a lack of appropriate guidance and support to enable 'professionals' to prevent this (Chase et al, 2008);

- Improved social work practice and guidance to address the needs of young parents with learning difficulties who are in or leaving care (Chase et al, 2008);

- The potential for care-experienced young people to be trained as mentors for other young people in care (Chase et al, 2008).

Given the substantial body of research that explores children's views and experiences of their contact with social workers, it may also be considered appropriate to consider focusing future research on the impact of children's views on social work practice, including an exploration of the barriers and facilitators to change in this respect.

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