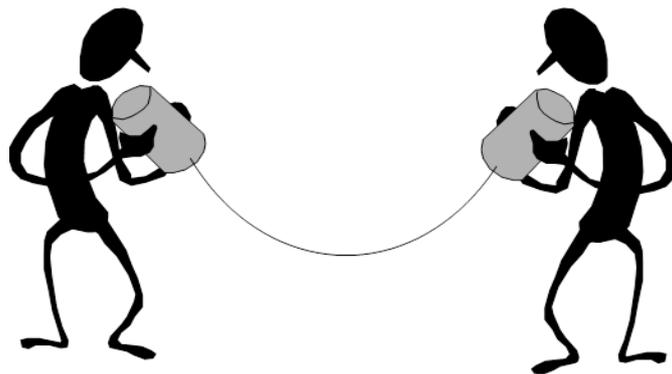


***Return to Social Work:
Learning Materials***



**MODULE 7:
COMMUNICATION AND
PARTNERSHIP WITH
SERVICE USERS**

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Introduction to the module

How social workers build relationships is central to the helping process. This module focuses on the core social work skills of communication and developing partnerships with children and their families. It covers themes of inclusion, participation, and power dynamics, and identifies strategies to address communication barriers when working with children and resistant parents.

Written communication is also covered in this module. The focus here is designed to refresh social workers' recording and report writing skills. Effective communication is another important theme that underpins the return to social work materials. There is a direct link to Module 10: Working in organisations, where the complexity of interagency communication and partnerships is covered. The focus in this module is on skill development and it provides useful tips to enhance relationship building with children and parents. This will help to refresh your skills in listening, negotiating, providing feedback and becoming aware of non-verbal communication. You are asked to consider what is meant by partnership and collaboration and to identify the different levels of participation.

A key theme of this module (and the *Munro Review 2011*) is the need for social workers to be 'child centred' even when the social work intervention is focused on developing parenting capacity. What children value in their social workers is highlighted together with ideas and tools for play-based child-friendly communication techniques. The principles of good partnership with parents in difficult circumstances is also covered and the need for social workers to be able to work with resistance and hostility.

Social work values, together with tools around assertiveness, awareness of self and managing risk, can ensure that assessments are high quality and based on the child's needs. Tips on recording and report writing are also provided and linked back to the quality of the assessment that needs to be underpinned by critical analysis and include professional judgments. You might find it helpful to build on your learning from Module 3: Reflective self here.

The learning outcomes for Module 7 include skill development in partnership working. Social workers in professional practice have responsibility for ensuring that they work collaboratively with children and parents and that practice is underpinned by principles of inclusion and participation. The links to a number of domains in the professional capabilities framework (PCF) highlight how central communication is to social work professional

practice. The capabilities in the PCF will support you in structuring your learning and developing a continuing professional development (CPD) plan that will help you to ensure you gain opportunities to develop and extend your communication skills when you return to professional practice.

After studying this module you might want to reread the learning outcomes and the links with the PCF before completing the end of module final reflections, as this might support you in identifying ongoing learning needs.



As you work through this module remember to keep a note of your thoughts, reflections and answers to any of the exercises. You can include these in your social work portfolio as evidence of your CPD.

Learning outcomes

By reading this module and completing the associated reflective exercises and learning activities you should achieve the following outcomes:

- Recognise the principles of partnership working and the role of good communication in this process.
- Understand the key skill of effective communication as a two-way process underpinned by values of participation and inclusion.
- Understand the importance of building effective relationships with children and their families and the role of active participation in the social work process.
- Understand the importance of written communication including accurate record keeping and clear, analytical evidence-based report writing.
- Reflect on and identify further learning or development needs in relation to this module.

Links to the Professional Capabilities Framework

By working through this module and completing the activities and self-assessment exercise, you will be able to reflect on and further develop your professional capabilities in the following areas at *Social Worker* career level.

Domain 1: Professionalism: Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development.

- *Make skilled use of self as part of your intervention*

- *Maintain awareness of own professional limitations and knowledge gaps. Establish a network of internal and external colleagues from whom to seek advice and expertise.*

Domain 2: Values & Ethics: Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice.

- *Demonstrate confident application of ethical reasoning to professional practice, rights and entitlements, questioning and challenging others using a legal and human rights framework*
- *Critically reflect on and manage the influence and impact of own and others' values on professional practice*
- *Recognise and manage conflicting values and ethical dilemmas, in practice, using supervision and team discussion, questioning and challenging others, including those from other professions*
- *Negotiate and establish boundaries to underpin partnership work with service users, carers and their networks, using transparency and honesty*
- *Ensure practice is underpinned by policy, procedures and code of conduct to promote individuals' rights to determine their own solutions, promoting problem solving skills, while recognising how and when self-determination may be constrained (by the law)*
- *Work to protect privacy and promote trust, while being able to justify, explain and take appropriate action when the right to privacy is overridden by professional or legal requirements*

Domain 3: Diversity: Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice

- *Recognise the complexity of identity and diversity of experience, and apply this in practice*
- *Critically reflect on and manage the power of your role in your relationship with others*

Domain 4: Rights Justice & Economic Wellbeing: Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic wellbeing.

- *Routinely integrate the principles of and entitlements to social justice, social inclusion and equality, and with support, consider how and when challenge might be needed*
- *Analyse differing needs, perspectives and competing rights and apply in practice*
- *Where appropriate, set up and/or enable access to effective independent advocacy*

Domain 5: Knowledge: Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory.

- *Recognise how systemic approaches can be used to understand the person-in-the-environment and inform your practice*
- *Acknowledge the centrality of relationships for people and the key concepts of attachment, separation, loss, change and resilience*
- *Understand forms of harm and their impact on people, and the implications for practice, drawing on concepts of strength, resilience, vulnerability, risk and resistance, and apply to practice*
- *Demonstrate a critical understanding of social welfare policy, its evolution, implementation and impact on people, social work, other professions, and inter-agency working*
- *Value and take account of the expertise of service users, carers and professionals*

Domain 7: Intervention and Skills: Use judgement and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support and prevent harm, neglect and abuse

- *Communicate with compassion and authority in challenging situations and with resistant individuals*
- *Routinely explain professional reasoning, judgements and decisions*
- *Engage effectively with people in complex situations, both short term and building relationships over time*
- *Gather information so as to inform judgement for interventions in more complex situations and in response to challenge*
- *Develop a range of interventions, use them effectively and evaluate them in practice*
- *Make timely decisions when positive change is not happening*
- *Clearly report and record analysis and judgements*
- *Demonstrate and promote appropriate information sharing*
- *Recognise and appropriately manage the authority inherent in your position*
- *Demonstrate confident and effective judgement about risk and accountability in your decisions*

Domain 8: Contexts and organisations: Engage with, inform and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice.

- *Demonstrate the ability to work within your own organisation, and identify and begin to work with the relationship between the organisation, practice and wider changing contexts*
- *Explore and identify how organisational practice can support good social work practice*

- *Be confident about your role in the team, working positively with others; draw on and contribute to team working and collaborative support wherever possible*

Communication: A key social work skill

Good communication is essential in social work in providing information, supporting, problem solving and bringing about change. Effective communication underpins relationship building and overlaps with many other core social work skills and values. This is reflected in the number of links to the PCF identified at the start of this module.

Communication is a two-way process that involves speaking, listening and taking account of non-verbal cues revealed through body language. This module will remind you of many of the core communication skills used by social workers in developing relationships in children and families social work. It will also focus on writing skills and the need for communication and partnership working to be extended to record keeping and report writing.

Social workers use a variety of communication skills in gathering information, gaining perspectives, and providing the information needed by others. This first activity will help you to start identifying some of the different communication skills used in different situations and contexts.

Learning activity: Different types of communication skills

Think about the following situations and identify what needs to be communicated and what sorts of communication skills might be needed.

- *Providing information to a parent and a child about a service*
- *How, when and why a child in foster care needs to move*
- *Gaining a child's view (wishes, thoughts and feelings) as part of an assessment*
- *Life story work with a child*

Make a note of your responses. As you work through this module you will have opportunities to focus on different aspects of communication skills and your professional responsibility in ensuring you communicate effectively through the quality of the relationships you build. You might want to refer back to the notes you make here later in the module.

Different skills are used when interviewing, listening and talking, in non-verbal communication, giving and receiving feedback, in negotiating and drawing up written agreements. These key differences in these skills are highlighted throughout this module, together with an exploration of their use in social work practice.

Interviewing

Interviewing has been described as 'a conversation with a purpose'. It involves a structured verbal exchange of information between (at least two) people. In interviews the social worker usually takes the role in leading and directing the conversation towards specific outcomes through the use of questioning. Interviews have a variety of purposes in social work and any interview can serve a number of the different purposes described below.

- **Seeking information:** The main aim here is to get information. It would be a key purpose of an interview with a child to ascertain their views as part of an assessment.
- **Providing information:** The main aim here is to provide information that the social worker has and the interviewee does not have. This would form the purpose of the interview if you were providing information about a service to a child or parent.
- **Persuasive interview:** Here the aim is to secure acceptance for a decision that the interviewee has little control over. This might form part of your purpose in explaining how and why a child needs to move foster placement in the learning activity above.
- **Therapeutic interview:** This contrasts with the persuasive interview, as it makes no attempt to impose change. Instead the aim is to support understanding around feelings or circumstances. This purpose might be used in therapeutic-based direct work with children.

Listening and talking

Interviewing relies on communication skills around listening and talking.

- **Listening** is an active process through which the listener aims to achieve an accurate understanding of all the messages that the other person is conveying.
- **Talking** is the skill of putting complex information into words that convey the intended meaning.

It is common in communication exchanges for words to be misunderstood and for us not to hear accurately what is being said. Issues covered by social work interventions and in interviews are often sensitive and painful, involving traumatic events for those involved.

In communication with people who are distressed or in crisis social workers will need to be able to:

- manage and respond to strong emotional responses
- work with resistance
- communicate authority and '*control*' within statutory interventions

- communicate *warmth and empathy*, helping to creating a safe environment for a vulnerable person to start to explore difficult issues and to make changes with support.

Using non-verbal communication

Social workers need to be able to use non-verbal skills in order to demonstrate they are actively listening to what is being communicated. Open body posture, good eye contact and head nods can be used to reassure the speaker that they have your full attention. It is also important to be aware that so much more is being communicated than what is said with words.

Social workers need to be aware and sensitive to tone, posture and gestures, behaviour, facial expressions, clothes and appearances. Silence and stillness are also powerful forms of communication. It is estimated that only around 7% of what is communicated is via words alone (Rush, 1989 cited in Stacks and Salwen, 2009); the remainder is communicated via non-verbal cues and tone of voice.

Reflective exercise:

Recall a time when you had something important you wished to communicate and felt listened to.

- *What listening qualities did you value?*
- *How did you know you had the listener's full attention?*
- *What non-verbal communication skills would you like to develop further?*

Note down your thoughts in your reflective log. Your shadowing experience might provide opportunities for you to observe the verbal and non-communication skills of practising social workers.

Giving and receiving feedback

In practice social workers are constantly required to give and receive feedback both to service users and to colleagues. Feedback is an interactive process and is often used following observations to inform decisions and to support learning.

The ability to give feedback that others can hear, accept and make use of is enhanced when the following communication skills are used:

- Clarity: make sure what you say is clear
- Emphasise positives: most people screen out positive comments and focus on the negative, so the positives might need re-emphasising

- Be specific: describe actual behaviours
- Be descriptive: recount what you observed
- Focus on the behaviour rather than the person
- Acknowledge all behaviour can be changed
- Own the feedback: use 'I' statements e.g. I noticed, I saw, I heard
- Use positive language that suggests the problem/difficulty can be resolved
- Support with coming to a better understanding rather than providing advice.

Learning activity: Observation of child and parent contact session

You have just observed a contact session between a mother and her two children aged three and five years who are currently in foster care.

The session went well with the mother interacting appropriately with both children. You were concerned however at the end of the session the mother did not seem to intervene when the children were fighting over the same toy tractor. Her approach was passive and resulted in the younger child being hit with the tractor.

- *Write down the sort of verbal feedback you might provide to the mother. Use the guidance above in structuring your feedback*
- *What helpful comment might be suggested to managing the siblings' disagreement when playing?*

The skill of receiving feedback is equally important. A reflective approach enables you to learn from the experience. When you receive positive feedback make sure you take a balanced view about it. Does it match the evidence? What assumptions and agendas might the person who gave it have? Positive feedback can be a powerful enforcer of what we are getting right in professional practice as well as a key learning tool. No social worker gets everything right all of the time.

There are likely to be times when you might get negative feedback or a complaint made by a service user. Receiving feedback can be an excellent tool for learning and supporting continual professional development. Below are some suggestions that will ensure that you listen carefully, avoid becoming defensive, seek clarity and integrate learning from negative feedback and complaints.

Useful information: Tips on receiving negative feedback

- ✓ *Always try and separate out what is being said from how it is being said*
- ✓ *Ask for clarity and examples around the complaint/negative feedback*
- ✓ *Think about your role in the situation and what you can do to improve it. This might highlight learning needs that can be addressed through CPD opportunities.*

- ✓ *If you are feeling upset or angry around being criticised always give yourself time to calm down before responding or taking action.*

Reflective exercise:

Recall a time from your social work practice when you received both negative and positive feedback from a service user.

- *What feedback was received, and how was it given?*
- *What skills were revealed from the positive feedback?*
- *What learning did you take forward and integrate into your future practice following the negative and the positive feedback?*

Note down your thoughts in your reflective log. How will you use service user feedback in improving and developing your professional practice?



The College of Social Work (TCSW) has published guidance on gathering and using feedback from people who use services and those that care for them. You can find this on the TCSW website:

www.tcsw.org.uk/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/Media_centre/SUandCarerFeedbackP/CF20.pdf

Negotiating skills

Negotiation involves communicating in such a way that an agreement can be reached where there are conflicting views. It requires a clear view of the legitimacy and the authority of the social worker's role and being clear about the extent to which ground can be conceded and where compromise and bargaining is possible. Negotiations often require patience, persistence and stamina.

Social workers often find themselves negotiating with, or on behalf of, service users.

Negotiating relies on other communication skills including listening and talking, observing, reflecting and analysing.

Success in social work negotiations is more likely if participants are:

- clear about the issues/disagreements
- clear about boundaries (who is responsible for what)
- prepared to listen with an open mind
- able to act with tact and forethought
- prepared to compromise
- able to assert own needs, wishes and feelings
- aware of differences in values and cultural traditions

- clear about outcomes and disagreements reached
- able to carry out commitments made.

Successful verbal negotiations in social work practice can result in a formal written agreement being drawn up on what has been negotiated, and this can be a useful practice tool where conflicts or contrasting views are apparent. An agreement of who will do what, when, where and how can help focus negotiations away from the disagreement towards a solution. Any written agreement or action plan should also involve a review of the agreement.

Learning activity: Drawing up written agreements

You have just taken over as the social worker to a young person who is in foster care who has been staying out overnight and engaging in some high risk activities with other young people on while on the streets.

Think about how you would prepare for this first meeting with the young person, and the negotiations that might need to take place around boundaries, expected behaviours, risk and corporate parenting responsibilities.

- *How might you draw on the skills identified above to achieve successful negotiations?*
- *In drawing up a written agreement with the young person what areas would you identify as important in seeking agreement together?*

This activity ends the first section of the module. In the complexity of social work practice with children and families many of the communication skills highlighted separately here become combined and are used by the social worker in a more interconnected way. This will help to build trust and confidence in relationships.

Partnership working

The ability to work effectively with others is central to social work practice. This section of the module will help you to reconnect with some of the principles and values of participation and inclusion that underpin a partnership approach. It will embed current policy and best practice approaches in working with children, their parents and other professionals and will highlight the role of social workers in gathering information for assessments, working with resistance and improving decision making and outcomes *with* children and their families.

Reflective exercise:

You might want to use the internet to explore different definitions.

- *Define what you mean by 'partnership' working?*

- *Define what you mean by 'collaboration'?*
- *Why do you think terms like partnership and collaboration are often used interchangeably in social work?*

✓ We will be coming back to considering partnership and collaboration later in the module.

Do not worry if you found it difficult to come up with a working definition that describes what you mean by partnership or the different types of collaborations that are negotiated within social work relationships. They are terms frequently used in social work practice but their meaning has not always been clearly articulated. You might have found the terms often have different meaning when used in different contexts. Module 10: Working in organisations will explore some of these contexts and the impact they can have on practice.

Your definition of partnership might have included themes around:

- sharing power
- joint decision making
- recognising different roles and responsibilities.

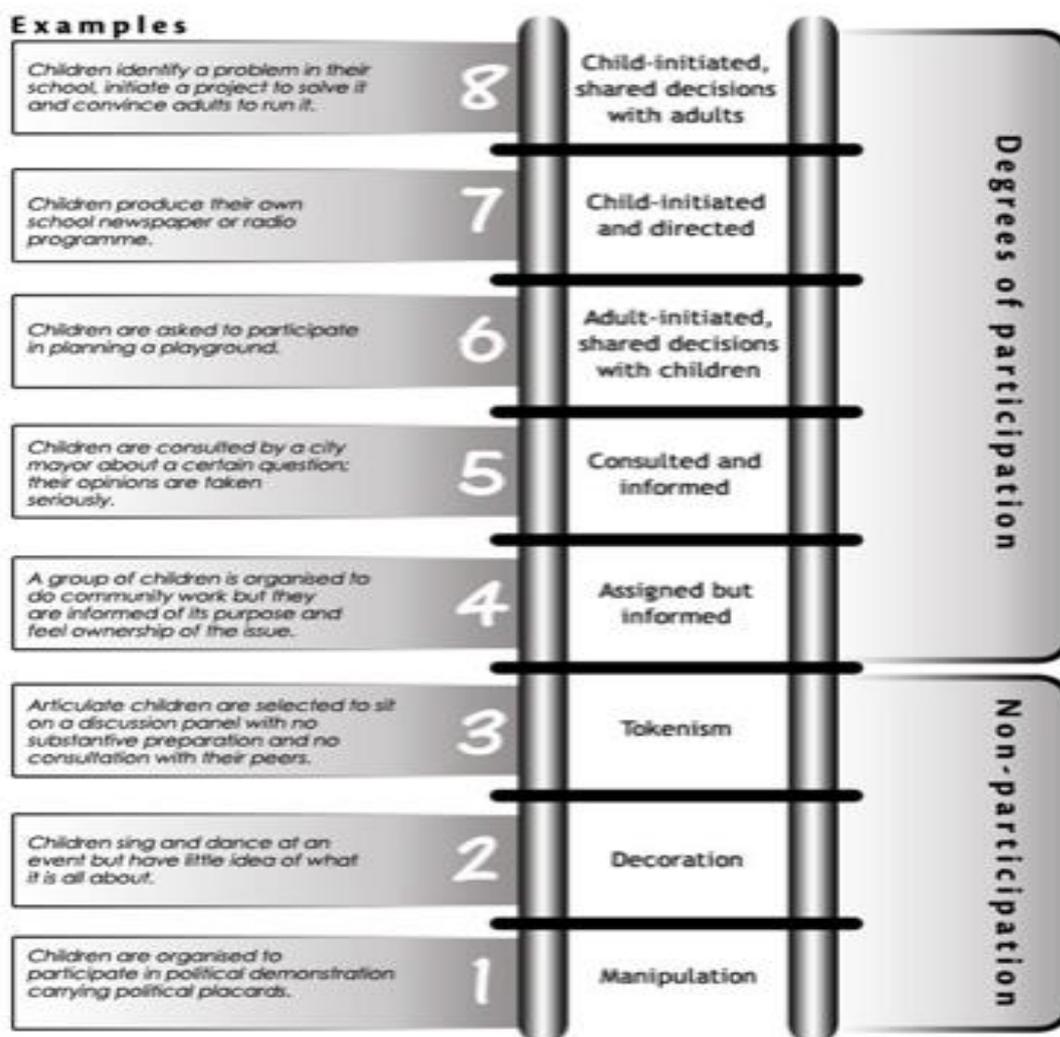
You might want to compare your definition with the one below taken from a SCIE workforce development guide:

'The essence of partnership is sharing. It is marked by respect for one another, role divisions, rights to information, accountability, competence, and value accorded to individual input. In short, each partner is seen as having something to contribute, power is shared, decisions are made jointly and roles are not only respected but are also backed by legal and moral rights.' (Tunnard, J. (1991) cited in Le Riche and Taylor, 2008 p12)

The strength of this definition, and why it was chosen here, is that the principles it describes can apply across a range of social work partnerships with stakeholders, including with users of services as well as other professionals. However, the problem with this definition is that it ignores the power dynamic that underpins many social work relationships. Without an acknowledgment of power differences the realities of the complexity of partnership working and collaborative practice cannot really be understood. Power relationships are considered in more detail in Module 5: Equality and diversity.

Ladder of participation

Various ladders of participation have been developed to reveal the different levels of participation that are negotiated within social work relationships. Hart's version (1992) has been reproduced here to provide an example. At the bottom of the ladder participation is denied. It is only at level 4 that a degree of participation is present in the relationship. At the top of the ladder children are sharing decision making with adults.



Source: Hart, 1992; http://www.eycb.coe.int/compasito/chapter_5/10.html

The same principles of participation can be applied within other social work relationships. By engaging with the purpose of the relationship you should be able to locate the type of participation within professional standards and values, and promote this in your relationships with service users, their carers and other agencies.

The purpose of social work

'The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000)

The International Federation of Social Workers' definition highlights the transactions that take place between people and their environment. It focuses the professional role on problem solving, and identifies social workers as agents of change in society, in families and in communities.

The role of relationship building is at the heart of social work and is used to bring about improvements to individual situations. Social work is a value driven profession that is underpinned by the professional values of human rights and social justice.

A reflective approach is needed in professional practice (see Module 3: Reflective self) together with good support, supervision, and CPD.

Social work has a specific focus on:

- Promoting people's ability to maximise their own capabilities
- Encouraging participation in education, training, employment, social and leisure activities
- Developing people's ability to form positive relationships within the family and social network. Helping people to create and maintain independence
- Assisting people to benefit from alternative forms of support that protect their dignity, rights and choices
- Protecting people's human rights and promoting the exercise of their rights and responsibilities as citizens (DH and DfES 2006, p49).

Reflective exercise:

Think about the different levels of participation identified in Hart's ladder of participation.

- *What level of participation do you think is present within statutory local authority interventions with children and families? How might this contrast with community-based self-help support groups?*
- *What level of participation do you feel most comfortable with?*
- *How does this fit with your personal value base and the purpose of social work?*

Different types of partnerships

Social workers and their agencies do not work in isolation. Being clear about your professional role and value base will help you to communicate your role, responsibilities and purpose when working with others to bring about change. The next activity asks you to think about the complex relationship-based work you will be engaged in as you return to practice and helps you to identify some of the key people that social workers need to work in partnership with when working with children and their families.

Learning activity: Different types of social work partnerships

Remember back to a piece of challenging social work practice with a family. Make a list of the different sorts of people you worked closely with and the reasons why.

Try and make your list comprehensive: include the children involved, family members, community representatives, colleagues (in the team and in other parts of the organisation) line managers, other professionals, other agencies, specialist services etc.)

- *Highlight from your list two or three individuals you feel you worked well with and record details of how and why these relationships worked so well.*
- *Identify two or three more challenging relationships and record details of how and why these relationships were more problematic.*
- *How were these relationships affected by power dynamics and how easy was it to work collaboratively with all the different partners?*
- *What development needs do you think you have and how would you approach a similar situation differently based on your reflections here?*

In thinking about your learning needs for this module, we hope that this activity has helped to identify some of the communications skills you would like to improve or develop or any areas of partnership working you have found more challenging in the past. Keeping a log of your reflections as you work through the module will help you with developing a learning plan based on the individual needs you are highlighting around communication.

Emotional intelligence and communication skills

Social work enters the lives of people when they are in crisis, are distressed and vulnerable, and in complex situations when highly charged emotions exist. Often information is confused, people involved will have conflicting needs and divergent perspectives, and polarities will exist around needs, risks and the decisions that need to be made.

At the start of the module we saw how many communication skills involve the use of self and need to be underpinned by emotional intelligence and good self-awareness. Module 3: Reflective self explores the issues of self-awareness and reflection in more depth.

The bullet points below will act as a reminder from your initial professional training of the important area of self-awareness when intervening in the lives of vulnerable people:

- understanding of self, including emotional triggers and default responses
- being comfortable with working with strong emotions
- awareness of own values
- awareness of how others view you.

Social workers need to develop professional resilience. In their ten top tips for building emotional resilience in professional social work practice, Grant and Kinman (2012) recommend social workers keep an 'emotion diary' where they write experiences, thoughts and feelings. This becomes a valuable personal resource helping to provide insights into why you feel as you do and in helping to identify patterns of behaviour and reactions that you need to be aware of. It will help to ensure that when working with service users you remain appropriately empathic and help you to recognise areas where you might need ongoing support.



More information about social work and emotional resilience can be found on the Community Care website: www.communitycare.co.uk/emotional-resilience-expert-guide/

Reflective exercise:

Think about the last time you became stressed in a work context.

- *What was the trigger?*
- *How does this link with some of your past experiences?*
- *What support and strategies do you need to put in place so that this issue does not become a barrier in your professional practice?*

Think about also recording your emotions in your reflective log as you work through the return to social work materials. Good self-awareness gained through reflective practice can identify when the barriers to communication might lie with the practitioner.

Child-centred practice

The legal context

A child's welfare should be paramount and central to social work practice. The Children Act 1989 placed a duty on local authorities to ascertain a child's wishes and feelings and give due regard to their age and understanding when determining what (if any) services should be provided under s.17 of the Act (see Module 8). This also applies to making decisions about actions to be taken to protect individuals under s.47 of the Act. (See also Module 9: Children in need.) Every assessment must be informed by the views of the child as well as the family and children should, wherever possible, be seen alone.



Remember, Article 12 of the UNCRC means that every child has the right to say what they think in all matters affecting them, and to have their views taken seriously. It is the social worker's responsibility to ensure they are listened to and their views are kept central to any assessment or intervention.

The Munro Review findings

The *Munro Review* highlighted that children's voices are still being missed in assessment and decision making processes. The final report, *A child-centred system* (Munro, 2011), emphasised the importance of social workers being able to communicate effectively with children, to gain insights into their lives, recognise how it feels for them and to gain their views on decisions that impact their lives. The review highlighted what a lot of research that has gone before showed: that children have not been at the centre of social work practice.

Learning activity: Munro Review

Read the extracts taken directly from the executive summary of the Munro Review Final Report (Munro, 2011) and then answer the questions that follow:

6.10: This review has heard that social workers sometimes feel inadequately trained to communicate with children. They may work with children of very varied ages, ethnicities, communication abilities and needs who require an equally varied range of skills in the social worker. Play and drawings may be more appropriate for some than anything resembling an 'interview'. In child protection work, the children may be very distressed and frightened, needing very sensitive skills in creating a level of trust where the child is willing to speak. The emotional impact of this work can also be very painful, making workers aware of how terrible some children's lives are.

6.20: Training in communicating with children and young people can solve part of the problem. There are also a variety of tools that can be used to help children communicate their views. The 'Three Houses' model described in chapter two, for example, provides a way for a social worker and child to have a conversation about what is going on, what worries the child, and what the child would like to happen, with the child adding drawings and comments to the house of good things, the house of worries, and the house of dreams. This produces a graphic record that conveys very powerfully what the child's life is like and what he or she would like to happen. (Munro, 2011 p89)

Now consider the following:

- *What might be some of the reasons why social workers continue to fail to communicate effectively with children?*
- *How might you go about finding out more about the 'Three Houses model'?*
- *What key messages will you take from this extract?*

The *Munro Review* is a key government report that is shaping current social work policy and practice with children and families. There are links to the full report under the further resources section. By reading this report in full you will be engaging with current policy and best practice models on child-centred practice. This will support you in getting your skills up to date and facing the challenges you may experience as you return to frontline social work practice with children and families.

What do children and young people want from their social workers?

Consultation with children and young people in care revealed they want social workers to:

- be on time, easy to contact, see me on my own
- have patience, be easy to talk to, listen
- be quick to sort things out
- say goodbye properly
- challenge managers when they say it is policy
- talk to me and not just my foster carers
- write a summary and show and talk about it. (Minnis and Walker, 2012 pp11-12)

This consultation reveals similar themes to the research findings of Thomas and O’Kane (1998) who talked with 47 children aged 8-12 years in local authority care about their participation in decision making. The key findings around what the children found important are summarised in the box below.

Useful information: What children and young people value in decision making

- ✓ **Time:** *This includes working with children at their pace, enabling them to stay in control.*
- ✓ **Relationships, trust and honesty:** *Children communicate best with people they have good relationships with. It is important to be friendly, honest and open.*
- ✓ **Active listening:** *Responding to what children are saying, summarising and drawing out meaning. Using open body language.*
- ✓ **Choice, information and preparation:** *Choice about whether/how they participate. Information in a format they understand, and prepared for beforehand so they can think about their response.*
- ✓ **Support and encouragement:** *Children need support and encouragement to speak up particularly when what they have to say is difficult/traumatic. Children do not like being ‘put on the spot’.*
- ✓ **Activities:** *Just sitting and talking is seen as ‘boring’. Games, drawings and other activities can make the process more interesting.*
- ✓ **The child’s agenda:** *Importance of making time to respond to the issues of most importance to the child.*
- ✓ **Serious fun:** *The fact that serious matters are being discussed should not drive the way meetings are planned and organised. If decision-making processes are made more enjoyable children will be more likely to get involved.*
- ✓ **Risk taking:** *Children’s participation involves an element of risk taking and children having an ability to learn from their experiences.*

Source: Thomas and O’Kane, 1998. *Summary Research Findings.*

Reflective exercise:

- *Were you surprised by any of the comments made by the children in either the consultation or the research findings?*
- *How might being aware of what children view as important help inform/shape your future practice?*
- *How might this knowledge and insight help you to build trusting relationships with children as their social worker?*

Communicating with children through play-based techniques

Play is the ‘*natural language of childhood*’ (Dale, 1992 cited in Norburn, 2010) and, combined with observational skills, is the most effective way for adults to gain insights into and understand children’s lived experiences (Munro, 2011). Play enables social workers to communicate on children’s terms and acts as a vehicle to gain their perspectives, views, feelings, hopes and fears.

Through play it is possible to capture both verbal and non-verbal communication around what is most important to them. Children bring their own experiences, culture and personal characteristics to their play and social workers need to be mindful of children as individuals and must not make assumptions. Adults often appear to underestimate both children's and young people's capabilities, and their ability to process difficult and complex information.

Reflective exercise:

Think about your own creative talents and interests. Maybe you have had the opportunity during your break from social work practice to develop new talents that could be adapted and used within play-based techniques with children.

- *How might you use your personal interests/creative talents to aid you with communicating with children?*

We are all different and social work professional practice still allows creativity in style and approach when communicating with children.

Below are some creative and child friendly suggestions made by Norburn (2010) that could be used to form the basis of play-based sessions with children as part of assessment work, ongoing direct work around care planning, life story work and preparations for adoption.

Useful information: Play-based activity suggestions

Working with metaphors: using objects, e.g. small figures; animals; buttons; stones etc. to represent those people around the child such as family members. Practitioners could ask a child to think about their family and select an object to represent each member. These could be used in Eco-maps or genograms.

Eco maps: the child could use the objects to represent themselves and those in their life. The child could be asked to place the objects as near or far away from themselves as they wish. Alternatively this could be done using creative materials. How creatively you use this medium is limited only by you as a practitioner. What is important is that it makes sense for the child.

Using a third object: to facilitate verbal communication skills and to help the child relate to you. Puppets and soft toys could be used in this way. A puppet may tell another puppet/toy/you what they think or feel. Children may use toys to help re-enact events, and explain what has happened to them in real life.

Art/Creative/Messy play materials: children can be encouraged to create pictures/models to help them communicate with you. Children can often convey through another medium what they cannot say verbally.

Baking/Icing biscuits: spending time baking may not be practicable; practitioners could facilitate icing bought biscuits – these can make excellent feelings faces that the child can then eat.

Worksheets/Masks: feelings worksheets such as happy and sad faces can be used; paper plates are excellent for drawing/painting feelings faces/masks on.

Stories/Storytelling: stories can be used to facilitate engagement and communication. There are a number of books written for very young children with specific topics in mind, such as dealing with bereavement and loss. These books will help children come to terms with personal experiences.

Outdoor play/Exploratory play: such as ball games; walks; climbing and exploring / natural objects such as stones; pebbles; shells; wood etc.

Music/Dance: movement and sound can be used to support children with expressing emotions and feelings. They can also help with ice-breakers at the start of sessions and as ending activities to sessions.

Age appropriate toys/games: playing games can help social workers to build relationships with children, getting to know their likes and interests and the opportunity to build confidence and self-esteem.

Source: Norburn, 2010.

Barriers to communication

Having explored some creative play-based methods that can aid communicate between children and social workers, it is also important to recognise and identify some of the challenges that can exist in current social work practice.

Norburn (2011) identifies a number of potential barriers to communicating effectively with younger children. These have been reproduced into a table format with potential strategies. Read the list of barriers and strategies and then complete the learning activity.

Potential barrier	Strategy to address the issue
<p>Time and workload</p> <p>Communicating with children takes time; to observe, engage and communicate. Young children have limited concentration and practitioners may have to plan a number of sessions/visits to get a sense of the child, their wishes and feelings.</p>	<p>Managers and supervisors need to recognise that practitioners may need additional time and resources to communicate effectively.</p>
<p>Hostile/non-compliant parents who may not want practitioners to speak to the child and in particular alone.</p>	<p>It may be possible to see and communicate with the child in nursery or to visit jointly with a practitioner already known to the child and family such as the health visitor.</p>
<p>Lack of confidence</p> <p>Social workers can lack experience, training and awareness of working with children at particular ages.</p>	<p>It may be possible to spend some time in a family centre/nursery as part of your shadowing experience to develop a sense of young children, their development and stages of play and communication. This could be as part of your CPD plan.</p>
<p>The environment</p> <p>This may not be conducive to effective communication, particularly in chaotic households. There may be a number of distractions for the child and these may also impact on the practitioner's observations.</p>	<p>It may be helpful for the child to be observed in another setting and this may also further inform assessment.</p>

<p>The child's age and stage of development May pose a barrier: for example, babies who have non-verbal language; toddlers who have limited concentration and pre-school children who are reluctant to communicate.</p>	<p>A sound understanding of child development and opportunities to engage with under-fives will help to develop skills and confidence.</p>
<p>Children who have additional needs or English as a second language.</p>	<p>Practitioners need to be guided by those who know the child and how they communicate such as parents, nursery staff, health visitor.</p>
<p>Lack of resources for practitioners to use to work creatively.</p>	<p>A basic 'tool kit' may be assembled on a limited budget and built up over a period of time (an example of a basic play tool kit is included below).</p>
<p>Lack of support and poor supervision may be a potential barrier to communicating effectively.</p>	<p>Practitioners need support from their managers to enable them to develop the skills and confidence to communicate effectively with under-fives.</p>
<p>The competing demands and priorities for practitioners and those of parents/carers and siblings may be difficult to manage and impact on practitioners' time and availability to communicate effectively with under-fives.</p>	<p>This will need to be addressed in supervision and a strategy may be to co-work cases within the team and with other professionals in a multi-agency arena.</p>

Source: Adapted from Norburn, 2011.

Learning activity: Bringing together learning on being child centred

Imagine that you are planning to interview three children aged 2, 7 and 12 around allegations of sexual abuse by the father. A police investigation is running along the local authority assessment.

Think about your responsibilities in gathering information toward the assessment:

- *What might be important to the children involved?*
- *Highlight any potential barriers to communicating with the children involved and think of strategies of how you might address these barriers.*

In completing your reflective log on learning gained you will be gathering evidence of your capability of preparing to communicate effectively with children.

- ✓ You will find suggested answers to the activity in the activity pack that accompanies the return to social work materials.

Putting together a play tool kit

It is recommended that social workers carry a tool kit that contains resources to help with engaging and communicating with children.

The sort of resources that practitioners report as helpful and aid in making communications more children friendly include:

- crayons and paper
- play dough
- books and stories
- puppets/soft toy
- small objects such as cars, building blocks, animals, people figures
- small magic wand
- toy telephone
- musical baby toy.

When working with older children over a series of sessions you might want to provide them with a folder at the start that they can decorate and then use to store drawings, paintings and creations from your play-based sessions together.

Children with additional needs

In your previous answer did you consider whether any of the children in the case study might have had additional needs due to a disability or language need? Good assessments support social workers to understand whether a child has needs relating to their care or a disability and/or is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm.

The specific needs of disabled children and young carers should be given sufficient recognition and priority in the assessment process. Further guidance is available and included in the additional resources section at the end of this module; in particular see *Safeguarding Disabled Children – Practice Guidance (2009)* and *Recognised, Valued and Supported: Next Steps for the Carers' Strategy (2010)*.

Working with language barriers

When language barriers exist, either because a child speaks a different language or has no verbal language, the social worker might need to work with an interpreter to support and aid communication. Shackman et al (1995) developed checklists around practical considerations, things to remember and points to check if things are going wrong when working with interpreters.

Practical considerations:

- Check the interpreter and service user speak the same language or dialect
- Allow time for pre-interview discussion with the interpreter in order to talk about the content of the interview and the way you will work together
- Encourage the interpreter to interrupt and intervene during the interview when necessary
- Use straightforward language
- Actively listen to the interpreter and the service user
- Allow enough time for the interview
- At the end of the interview check the child/service user has understood everything and if they want to know or ask anything else
- Have a post-interview session with the interpreter. (Shackman et al, 1995)

Being aware of the practical arrangements for facilitating interpretation can make all the difference to the quality of communication and the experience of the child or young person. Shackman et al (1995) also go on to highlight some of the issues that as a social worker you will need to be aware of when working with children, young people, and their families where language is a particular issue.

You will need to remember that in some situations there will be enormous pressure on the interpreter, and power dynamics will be evident both between the social worker and the child or young person and between the social worker and the interpreter. In this context it remains your responsibility to make sure the interview is carried out appropriately. The following checklist, developed by Shackman et al (1995), will help you to think about the interactions and communication where an interpreter is being used and to identify any difficulties that may be experienced.

Useful information: Checklist if things seem to be going wrong

- ✓ *Does the interpreter speak both languages fluently?*
- ✓ *Is the interpreter acceptable to the child/service user (e.g. same sex)?*
- ✓ *Is the child/service user prevented from telling you anything because of a relationship with the interpreter?*
- ✓ *Is the interpreter translating exactly what you and the service user/child is saying or putting forward their own views and opinions?*
- ✓ *Does the interpreter understand the purpose of the interview?*
- ✓ *Have you provided time for the interpreter to get to know and explain what is going on?*
- ✓ *Does the interpreter feel able to interrupt and point out problems?*
- ✓ *Are you using simple and jargon free English?*
- ✓ *Is the interpreter finding the content of the interview difficult/embarrassing?*
- ✓ *Are you asking too much of the interpreter?*
- ✓ *Are you allowing the interpreter enough time?*
- ✓ *Are you maintaining as good a relationship with the interpreter as you can?*

Source: Shackman et al, 1995.

Reflective exercise:

- *In your previous social work practice did you ever work with an interpreter?*
- *How might you use the checks list detailed above to plan and prepare for interviews when an interpreter is needed?*

Make a note in your reflective log and this can be used as evidence of you developing capabilities in Domain 7: Interventions and skills

Module 5: Equality and Diversity provides the opportunity to explore cultural issues in more depth.

Partnership working with parents

Children are part of families and often the reasons why families seek support/come to the attention of social work services is due to parental or wider family difficulties. Module 8: Safeguarding and Corporate Parenting and Module 9: Children in Need look in more detail at the risk factors that impact on parenting capacity and will cover the social work role in family support and child protection work.

The focus here is on building effective partnerships with parents and the communication skills needed when parents are reluctant to engage with services, are resistant to change or there is conflict. Often the social work service is being delivered to a parent or carer but the assessment and work provided should remain focused on the needs of the child and its impact should be judged against the outcomes for the child.

Important reminder: High quality social work assessments:

- ✓ *are child centred*
- ✓ *are based on decisions made in the child's best interests where there is a conflict of interest*
- ✓ *are rooted in child development and informed by evidence*
- ✓ *are focused on action and outcomes for children*
- ✓ *are holistic in approach, addressing the child's needs within their family and wider community*
- ✓ *ensure equality of opportunity*
- ✓ *involve children and families*
- ✓ *build on strengths as well as identifying difficulties*
- ✓ *are integrated in approach*
- ✓ *are a continuing process not an event*
- ✓ *lead to action, including the provision and review of services*
- ✓ *are transparent and open to challenge.*

Source: DfE (2013) Working Together guidance, p19.

It is the responsibility of the social worker to make clear to children and families how the assessment will be carried out and when they can expect a decision on next steps (DfE, 2013).

Learning activity: Preparing for initial contact

You are the duty social worker and been asked to visit a family following an anonymous referral from a neighbour stating that the children aged four and seven are being neglected. At times they are left on their own, the house is dirty and their parent is a drug user. There are many people visiting the house and the older child does not go to school regularly.

Think about the communication skills you will need before, during and after the visits. Make notes under the headings below:

- *Collecting sufficient information and preparations before the visit*
- *Introducing yourself and your role*
- *Striving for partnership under difficult circumstances*
- *Assessing strengths and risks*
- *Decision making.*

Make notes in your learning log of any learning needs identified around remaining child focused when working with parents in difficulty.

- ✓ You will find suggested answers to the activity in the activity pack that accompanies the return to social work materials.

Check your notes against the *Working Together* guidance on high quality assessments. Do your notes reveal a focus on the presenting parental difficulty rather than the impact of how the parental difficulty is affecting the two children?

Reflective exercise:

- *What do you understand by being child centred when you work with parents in difficulty?*
- *What strategies will you put in place when you return to social work practice to ensure the focus of your work remains on the needs of children?*
- *What role might supervision play in supporting you to maintain a clear child focus in your professional practice?*

Remember that every assessment should be child centred. Where there is a conflict between the needs of the child and their parents/carers, decisions should be made in the child's best interests. Many serious case reviews (SCRs), including the one for Peter Connelly (Baby 'P') in 2010, identify professional failings relating to over-identification with parents' needs and losing sight of the child and their needs.

Power dynamics within professional social work relationships

Look again at the notes you wrote earlier in the module around partnership working. What do you recognise as some of the power dynamics that might get in the way of effective collaborations between social workers and parents? How has the poor representation of social work in the media affected the way the public view social work and the difficult professional role it carries on behalf of society in child protection work?

Below are some principles of partnership working with parents in child protection:

- Distinguish between personal values and beliefs and professional roles and responsibilities
- Be open and honest about concerns
- Recognise strengths and resilience factors in the family
- Consider confidentiality issues and seek agreement to contact other agencies
- Treat the parents/carers with dignity and respect
- Be clear about your power to intervene – now and longer term
- Listen to the views and experiences of all the family members
- Facilitate access to advocates, mentors and interpreters
- Use plain, jargon-free language.

Reflective exercise:

You might find it helpful to compare these principles with the statements in the Values and Ethics domain in the PCF.

Keep a note of the learning opportunities you would like during your shadowing experience that will help you to evidence capabilities of partnership working with parents in difficult circumstances.

If parents feel respected informed and feel that the social worker(s) is being open and honest, they are more likely to respond to professional intervention. Aiming to build trust and confidence in the professional relationship with parents will increase the opportunity for honesty, openness and improve the quality of the information shared. However, you should also be aware of how the family perceive your role as the social worker and the impact this is likely to have – transparency is an important element of relationship building.

Working with resistance and conflict

Resistance, conflict and defensiveness are normal human emotions and reactions when people feel fear, are threatened or feel judged. Combined with the shame of what has happened, feeling powerless, unsafe and not understanding what is being communicated due to the use of jargon and processes they do not understand, it is not surprising that in highly charged and difficult situations barriers exist between social workers and the parents they seek to work in partnership with.

Reflective exercise:

Think about something you are ashamed and/or embarrassed about.

- *What would your reaction be if a stranger knocked on your door and asked to talk to you about the experience?*
- *Do you think you would be happy to share all the information?*
- *In what ways might you try and protect yourself, particularly if you were not clear what was going to happen to the information following the meeting?*

Munro (2011) highlighted that it is the quality of the relationship that is the essential foundation in supporting the capacity for parents to make positive changes to protect their child and keep them safe in the future.

Forrester et al (2012) suggest that resistance should not be seen solely to exist with the client, or as a product of child protection. Rather '*...it is a product of the nature and the*

quality of the interaction between client and social worker'. This approach places the social worker's behaviour and responses under the spotlight both as a potential cause for resistance and also the most important tool for reducing it.

Learning activity: Working with highly resistant parents

Read the statement taken from Lord Laming's report from the Victoria Climbié Inquiry.

'Adults who deliberately exploit the vulnerability of children can behave in devious and menacing ways. They will often go to great lengths to hide their activities from those concerned for the wellbeing of the child. Staff often have to cope with unpredictable behaviour of people in the parental role...And it is a job which carries risks, because to every judgement they make, those staff have to balance the rights of a parent with that of the protection of the child.' (Laming, 2003 p13)

- *What role do you think effective supervision and support from your line manager might provide when working with parents who do not engage with social work services?*
- *What strategies might you put in place to keep safe when visiting families that are unpredictable or hostile?*

- ✓ You will find suggested answers to the activity in the activity pack that accompanies the return to social work materials.

Disguised compliance

Disguised compliance has been defined as:

'...involving a parent or carer giving the appearance of co-operating with child welfare agencies to avoid suspicion, to allay professional concerns and ultimately diffuse professional intervention.' (NSPCC, 2010)

Disguised compliance has been a common theme in recent high profile child deaths. For example in the situation of Victoria Climbié toys were only brought out to coincide with social work visits. In the case of Peter Connolly the mother appeared to be doing everything social workers asked of her. As we know from these two well documented cases the existence of disguised co-operation from parents often prevents or delays an understanding of the severity of the harm for the children involved. It results in cases drifting, rather than timely decisions being made within a child's timeframe (See DfE (2012) *Decision making within a child's timeframe*, a summary of which is included in the appendix of this module.)

Lord Laming (2009) identified 'professional over-optimism' and the need to replace this with 'respectful uncertainty' when working with parents. Assessing the evidence around improved

outcomes for children helps to keep the social work intervention focused on the child's need and ensures timely decision making.

Social workers need to use reflective supervision to stand back and to see if any changes and/or progress have been made against the original plan and draw on evidence to make professional judgements.

Various standardised tools have been developed based on practice-led research that can help workers to assess risk and protective factors and will support social workers in making professional judgements around plans for children. In communicating with parents around their ability to change, social workers need to develop skills in assertiveness.

Useful information: The 'assertive social worker'

- ✓ *Having an appropriate style: not aggressive or passive*
- ✓ *Feeling confident about self-assessment*
- ✓ *Respecting yourself and others equally*
- ✓ *Having clear goals and outcomes*
- ✓ *Being able to say that you do not know or do not understand*
- ✓ *Listen to other points of view even if you do not agree*
- ✓ *Not putting others down*

Source: Pearson, 2009; (<http://rpjb.co.uk/index.html>)



See Ruth Pearson talking about her work online:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgQEoB9UbmY

Learning activity: Improving the quality of the relationship with parents

How might an assertive approach help to:

- *Reduce/counter parental resistance?*
- *Keep a clear focus on the needs of the child?*
- *Identify when parents are failing to engage and make the necessary changes needed to meet their child's needs into the future?*

- ✓ Make notes in your reflective log as these will provide evidence of your developing capabilities in the PCF in Domain 9: Interventions and skills.

You might want to research further some of the techniques around developing assertive social work practice such as the broken record technique, the 'three yes' question technique,

solution-focused approaches and motivational interviewing. Information on these can be found in the further resources section at the end of the module (see Pearson, 2009).

Communication with fathers

Traditionally work with parents has been predominantly focused around working with mothers. The *Munro Review* (2011) identified failures by social workers to engage effectively with men, and suggested that as a result vital information is missed in assessments about the child and their relationships with their fathers and other adult males.

‘Communicating with men is also a recurrent problem and leads to their being less visible in the way the case is managed, with their impact on their children being less well assessed or the direct focus of work. A study of cases where the men were known to be violent to their partners provides evidence of a lack of involvement or good assessment of the impact they are having on the children.’ (Munro Final Report, 2011 p89)

Reflective exercise:

- *Why do you think less attention in child protection has been placed on communicating and building partnerships with fathers?*
- *What might some of the challenges/barriers be in the way services are currently structured?*
- *Reflect on your past experience of working with fathers and record any learning needs in this area.*



You might find the Family Rights Group resources on ‘Working with risky fathers’ (2011) helpful as you think about the communication skills you will need to develop to work effectively with fathers:
www.frg.org.uk/involving-families/fathers

Recording and report writing

Social workers communicate verbally in a range of different ways, and the same applies to written communication. Social workers need to use written communications for form filling, letter writing, emails, case notes recording, minute taking and report writing. This section will focus on two of the most important forms of social work writing skills, recording and report writing.

The *Family Justice Review* (Nov 2011), through its recommendations and the reform process that has followed, aims to minimise the impact of delays on children in the court

system and to achieve a permanent outcome for them more quickly. The themes of the review mirror some of those in the social work reform process around promoting better multi-agency working, strengthening social work skills and building a strong evidence base to support professional judgments. Its recommendations highlighted the need for social workers to improve their assessment recording and report writing skills.

Recording and record keeping

Recording can take many forms depending on the agency and the setting in which it takes place. For example, recording in a residential setting or children's centre will be very different to a statutory local authority children's service team. At its simplest, recording is the gathering of information about service users in written form. Good note taking during interviews and meetings is essential and as a returning social worker you will need to refresh your skills and techniques for taking notes.

Recording is essential to the social work role. It provides continuity of care for service users and accountability in professional practice. The purpose of recording is to provide information to ensure services are delivered to the highest standards, to meet statutory and agency requirements.

The value of good record keeping includes:

- Evidence that children's needs are met as social workers plan, monitor and evaluate their work
- Provides a clear history and communicates information to other staff and agencies, enabling a continuity of service if the practitioner is ill, unavailable or changes role
- Protects the child and helps ensure they receive a consistent level of service and support
- Provides evidence of work and the basis on which key decisions have been made. This can be used as evidence in court proceedings, complaint investigations and as part of internal and external enquires
- Provides information to monitor, review and evaluate service delivery and the management of resources, and aids future planning thus contributing to an ongoing improvement of practice
- Provides an audit trail for inspection.

The Data Protection Act (1998) covers all forms of paper and electronic records, and provides people who use services with a right of access to their records and a right to expect

that records are dealt with confidentially. These rights are underpinned by the Human Rights Act (1998) Article 8: the right to privacy and family life.

All social work agencies have policies on data protection and confidentiality, and you will need to become familiar with these as part of your induction programme as you return to professional practice.

Local authorities have moved towards simpler and more open forms of recording. Social workers are encouraged to share their recording with service users as part of the partnership approach.

Computer-based recording systems

Social work record keeping has moved increasingly to computer-based recording systems over recent years. This might mean a marked shift for you if your time out of social work has coincided with the introduction of electronic recording.

Computer-based records are structured and often force you to be succinct and use specific categories, using boxes with a strict word count. This can be a challenge if the information you want to record does not fit easily with the prescribed structure and it might feel as if the flow of what you want to record becomes disjointed.

Computer-based recording systems are often designed to be multi-functional. As well as for case recording purposes, they are also used as management tools to aid data collection and for statistical analysis. This again can make them feel less user friendly and less like a creative tool to support your professional practice.

Reflective exercise:

Think about when you were last in social work practice.

- *In what ways do you think recording might have changed?*

In regard to developing your recording skills identify any learning needs and action points under the following headings:

- *Time management*
- *ICT literacy*
- *Openness with service users*
- *Concise, clear and evidence-based*
- *Service users' confidentiality.*

Keep a record of these in your learning log as it will help support your induction plan as you return to social work practice.

Children's case notes and care plans

Case notes and care plans can improve the quality of care for children and communicate a great deal about the quality of a social worker's work. They provide essential information about events that have informed decision making and action.

Case notes are used:

- To provide information and evidence for case conferences, reviews and for court
- As evidence of professional accountability
- As evidence for children's and parents' participation in the processes
- For supervision discussions
- To enable continuity when workers are on leave or in joint working
- Information for planning and administrative purposes
- For data to be used in research and for evaluation purposes
- To evidence details of shortfall in service provision
- To demonstrate that legal safeguarding responsibilities have been discharged
- As a memory aide
- During inspections, to check whether quality standards are being met.

Reflective exercise:

Reflect on some of the different purposes of case note recording for:

- *children*
- *social workers*
- *managers*
- *others*

How might you ensure your recording is kept up to date and reflects best practice in terms of agency requirements?

Make notes in your learning log and highlight any learning needs.

- ✓ Under the 'others' heading in the above activity, did you identify the role of research?

Case records often contain valuable data and evidence based on practice experience that can be drawn on (once ethical permissions have been granted) for research studies that focus on improving outcomes for children in the future. Organisations like Research in Practice and many local universities work in partnership with employers to support practice-led research. There has been a growing body of evidence-based knowledge gained through qualitative and quantitative studies that have been built up from practice-based research studies.



Visit the Research in Practice website and explore their evidence bank and the research briefings available: www.rip.org.uk/

It is important that your recording and reports reflect current best practice in social work. Regularly visiting websites like Research in Practice and joining The College of Social Work (TCSW) and making use of membership services will support you to keeping your practice up to date.



Remember, social workers should always reflect the latest research on the impact of neglect and abuse when analysing the level of need and risk faced by the child. This should be reflected in the case recording.

Report writing

Reports are recording for a particular occasion, when a formal statement is presented by a social worker in written form. It therefore follows that reports are written for someone else who may well have the power to make decisions with far-reaching consequences for the child and their family.

Reports may be presented in court, to a review meeting, to a child protection case conference or to a resource panel. They may form part of ongoing recording on a case file. Social workers are required to write a range of reports and depending on the setting this could include in children's services:

- Assessment reports
- Case review reports
- Court reports
- Safeguarding children reports
- Form F assessments
- Adoption reports.

All reports need to be evidence based and constructed so that they are non-judgemental and anti-discriminatory. Module 5: Equality and diversity considers these approaches in more depth.

It is important to consider the range of audiences for the report, which often include children, parents, managers, workers from other agencies and the courts. Reports often need to justify resources and will be scrutinised by panels or used as the basis for decision making, where again the contents will be scrutinised to ensure that the recommendations are justified and evidenced based.

Before you start to think about writing a social work professional report it is important you determine:

- Who is the report for?
- What is its purpose?
- Who will read the report?
- What is already known about the family and individuals?
- Who else is involved with the family?

Think about who you might gather information from to help you write your report.

Useful information: Checklist – What makes a good report?

- ✓ *Clear structure*
- ✓ *Plain English*
- ✓ *Robust and specific assessments*
- ✓ *Defensible decisions*
- ✓ *Clear analysis*
- ✓ *Balanced strengths and risks*
- ✓ *Links with relevant theories (e.g. attachment), recent research findings, best practice models*
- ✓ *Considers the views, wishes and feelings of the child*
- ✓ *Considers the views, wishes and feelings of other family members*
- ✓ *An owned holistic assessment of needs and risk*
- ✓ *Puts forward a clear proposal and recommendations*
- ✓ *Is succinct and to the point*

Bogg (2013) provided the following advice on structuring your report:

- If a template is provided follow it
- Always plan your report before writing
- The report should follow a logical structure
- Use headings that are succinct and accurately describe the contents
- Keep tenses and perspective consistent
- Avoid jargon, and use formal language
- Be respectful of the report's subject and consult with them as appropriate (Bogg, 2013 p26).

Some good practice points in report writing highlighted by Bogg (2013) include asking a colleague to proofread; making sure your report covers facts, analysis and conclusions; and remembering to discuss the finished report with the child and their parents before submitting it to the decision-making forum.

Practising report writing skills

Think about what you have already learnt in the module about making good assessments and how this can be used to underpin and support your report writing.

Defensible assessments:

- use facts to back up opinions
- provide reasons for the judgements
- use clear, logical explanations to back up what you think
- avoid assumptions, generalisations and promote anti-discriminatory practice.

Learning activity: Practising report writing

Read the notes provided below which are factually correct.

- *Mother is Iranian but has cut all ties with Iran*
- *Parents had an abusive relationship*
- *Mother's relationship with her own father abusive*
- *No further contact with child's father as he has returned to Iran*
- *No extended family ties*
- *Mother wants her son to be brought up to be English*
- *Son has intense relationship with mother*
- *Delayed child development*
- *Little English, basic Arabic*
- *Exhibiting behaviour that may be associated with sexual abuse and/or autism*

Restructure the notes into a paragraph with the aim of grouping together the relevant information. Write up any notes in your reflective log.

By completing this activity and highlighting any learning needs you are starting to work towards the capabilities in the PCF Domain 7: Skills and interventions around 'Clearly report and record analysis and judgements'.

The distinction between facts and opinion is important when writing reports. Most reports will require a professional opinion, based on the information, which draws on the worker's judgement to set out the most appropriate course of action. Thus a report will often argue a case for a course of action or a scarce resource.

Useful information: Facts, interpretation and opinion

- ✓ **Fact:** *A fact is something certainly known to have occurred or to be true.*
- ✓ **Interpretation:** *An interpretation is the representation of a thing or event, according to one's conception of it.*
- ✓ **Opinion:** *An opinion is a judgement or belief based on grounds short of absolute proof.*

The next learning activity highlights the importance of the quality of what is contained in the report and the need to highlight the difference between facts, opinion and professional judgments.

Learning activity: Distinguishing fact and opinion

Read the statements below and complete the learning activity that follows.

- *There are inadequate play and stimulation opportunities available.*
- *The bruise and swelling are consistent with hitting his head on the door.*
- *This is the first incident of abuse to the child.*
- *The flat is unsuitable for bringing up a young child.*
- *Mrs Green is good at keeping her flat tidy.*
- *Experienced professionals are better at dealing with child protection issues.*
- *Children who are abused often become abusers.*
- *The child said his dad hit him.*
- *I saw Peter playing with toys when I last visited.*
- *Mrs Green does not display appropriate parenting skills when relating to her son.*

Now answer the following questions:

- *Which of these statements represent fact?*
- *Which of these statements represent opinion?*
- *What sort of evidence would you require to back up both the facts and opinions?*
- *What do you understand by the term 'professional judgement'?*

Make notes in your learning log on this activity and highlight any learning needs around the social work professional role in: analysing assessment information, providing evidence to support statements, and making professional judgements in social work reports.

- ✓ You will find suggested answers to the activity in the activity pack that accompanies the return to social work materials.

Remember, report writing is an important social work skill, which is developed through practice and support. Do not be surprised if it takes you time to find your own style and 'voice' in report writing again, especially if it has been some time since you last wrote a social work report. The further resources section at the end of the module might help with developing this important social work writing skill.

Written reports become powerful records and it important that they are accurate and non-oppressive in their style. The checklist below might help you to ensure that you remain sensitive to equality and diversity issues in writing your report.

Useful information: Report writing checklist

- ✓ *Only include what is relevant*
- ✓ *Highlight difference if it is relevant for the purpose of the report*
- ✓ *Avoid generalisations*
- ✓ *Avoid jargon*
- ✓ *Avoid using labels*
- ✓ *Remember to include positives*
- ✓ *Avoid loaded and emotive language*

Analysing and critical thinking

The information gathered through your assessment needs to go through a process of synthesis, analysis and evaluation before any conclusions can be drawn. This is an important professional social work task that involves the practitioner thinking carefully about the information, drawing on underpinning theory and research and reflecting both in, and on, action. (This is where good support and challenge from line managers is critical.) It is only then that the information gathered from assessment can be used to inform decisions and judgements in reports.

Remember that tools and procedures are not a substitute for thinking, and do not replace the need for practitioners to exercise professional judgement. An important message that will underpin your ability to write a strong social work report is that it is based on the quality of your assessment. It is important to recognise that assessment is a process, and analysis should be taking place at each stage of that process.

Analysis is when you look at information critically in order to evaluate it and put it into order for a particular purpose. It is through analysis that you try to make sense of the information you have gathered.

Analysing information requires practitioners to:

- gather information from all available sources
- prioritise information according to its relevance
- piece it together
- identify inconsistency
- compare the sources of information
- separate fact from fiction
- build up evidence

- provide your opinion.

Critical thinking is an important part of analysis as it defends the arguments in the report against charges that it is biased, lacks supporting evidence or is incomplete. Critical thinking, either independently or with your manager, will help you to recognise different perspectives, test the soundness of the claims made or test the evidence to support those claims. One aspect of critical thinking is hypothesising, which can help you (and your manager) to try out different interpretations, give different meanings to data, and think about a range of possible ways of explaining what might be going on.

Recording and report writing induction activities

If you are not yet in a social work role, it might help if you start to think about the sort of induction tasks you might need to cover when you return to social work practice. This might reflect the changes that have taken place in relation to the move to computer-based recording, around current best practice, and agency procedure in report writing.

Some of the induction activities you might want to consider include:

1. Ask to read agency guidance and procedures in case notes, record keeping and report writing
2. Attend agency ICT training and become familiar with the way information is stored and how to access information from the agency databases
3. Ask to see examples of colleagues' recording and social work reports
4. Have a discussion with your line manager around agency standards and their expectations
5. Use supervision to share report drafts and to gain support with critical thinking, structuring your thoughts and around developing professional judgements
6. Share drafts of reports with colleagues and gain their feedback on how and where they can be improved
7. Find out the support you can expect with proofreading and the quality assurance processes reports go through before being shared.

Reflective exercise: Identifying ongoing learning for report writing

From the induction tasks listed above, identify those that might be most helpful to you when you take up a new social work role.

- *Can you identify other learning opportunities that might support you in developing your written communication skills?*
- *What additional steps might you take to address the learning needs highlighted as you worked through the recording and report writing part of the module?*

Make notes in your learning log on your reflection from this activity. You might find some of the resources highlighted in the additional resources section helpful in guiding your next steps.

Module summary

We have reached the end of Module 7. You should now feel reconnected with many of the important communication skills in social work and their importance in developing effective relationships with children, parents and other agencies. The other important theme in this module has been around written communication and the role it plays in decisions and improving outcomes for children.

The module has drawn on current policy and referred to best practice, theory and evidence to assist you in updating your communication skills and support you in taking a partnership approach. The completed activities should have helped you with identifying ongoing professional development in line with the PCF.

Module self-assessment exercise

Complete the following quiz. You may find it helpful to discuss your answers with a colleague or supervisor if available. Remember to keep a note of your answers and any reflections as part of your ongoing CPD portfolio. When you are happy with your answers refer to the accompanying resource pack to check how many you got right.

1. Name two different interview purposes.
2. Identify three different nonverbal cues that help to communicate that you are actively listening.
3. When providing feedback to a service user why is it important to 'own' your feedback?
4. How can service user feedback support continual professional development (CPD)?
5. Identify two examples of participation and two examples of non-participation from the participation ladder.
6. Name four qualities that children value in their social workers.
7. Identify three possible barriers in communicating with children and the strategies that need to be put in place to address the barrier.
8. What preparations are needed when using an interpreter to communicate with a service user?
9. Identify five different reasons why good record keeping is important in professional practice.
10. Name ten elements that contribute to a good report.

How did you score?

Less than 16 = Revisit the entire module and complete the relevant exercises and additional reading indicated

17-21 = Revise the relevant sections where you did not answer correctly

22+ = Well done! Check any answers that you did not get right and make a note of them. Now review the references and resources and follow up on any areas of interest or professional development needs.

Finally, before you move on, complete the following template to identify any further development needs in relation to this area and identify how your learning relates to your capabilities under the PCF.

Maximum score = 30 marks

Final reflection and further development needs

Module: Communication

What are the three key areas of learning you have achieved as a result of working through this module?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

This module is linked to the PCF. Write a short reflection about how you think your learning has contributed to your capabilities in each identified domain:

- Domain 1: Professionalism: Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development.
- Domain 2: Values and Ethics: Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice.
- Domain 3: Diversity: Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice.
- Domain 4: Rights, Justice and Economic Wellbeing: Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic wellbeing.
- Domain 5: Knowledge: Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory.
- Domain 6: Critical Reflection and Analysis: Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision making.
- Domain 7: Intervention and Skills: Use judgement and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities.
- Domain 8: Contexts and Organisations: Engage with, inform and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice.

What else do you need to know and/or learn to demonstrate your capabilities in this area?

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Learning activities: Suggested answers

Learning activity: Bringing together learning on being child centred

1. Your responsibility in gathering information

As the investigating social worker you have a responsibility under The Children Act 1989 to ascertain a child's feelings and wishes. Every assessment must be informed by the views of the child and children should, wherever possible, be seen alone. You will need to plan three different interviews. The children are of different ages and developmental stages and an understanding of child development needs to guide your approach.

As a police criminal investigation is happening at the same time you need to work collaboratively with the police and ensure that the approach agreed is child friendly and focused on the needs of the children involved.

2. What might be important to the children?

Does your response here include some of the qualities identified by the Minnis and Walker consultation and Thomas and O'Kane research findings on page 22-23? You might also need to think about the environment and ensure it is child friendly.

3. Potential barriers and strategies

Did any of your responses to this part of the activity link to the potential barriers identified by Norburn (2010)? It is important that once barriers are identified strategies are put in place to address the issue.

Did you identify any possible barriers in needing to work collaboratively with the police? Module 10 will provide tips and advice on how to achieve effective inter-agency partnership working.

Learning activity: Preparing for initial contact

1. Preparations before the visit

Before the visit you need to check what information is already known about the family by your own agency. Check records and databases. What other agencies are currently working with the family? What information might they hold? Checking with the school attendance records and whether the school has concerns will also be an important part of substantiating information contained in this anonymous referral. The nature of the information gathered will help to identify the purpose of your visit in terms of the safeguarding approach taken. Information gathered before the visit will also help to establish if the visit should be undertaken jointly with a colleague from your own service or jointly with another agency.

2. Introducing yourself and your role

It is really important that you identify your professional role and the agency you represent. Explain clearly the reason for your visit and the concerns that you need to assess. It will be important to not only meet the parents but you also need to see the children as part of this intervention.

3. Striving for partnership

You need to prepare for resistance and possible conflict. Some of the issues you will need to cover with the parents will involve having to have difficult conversations about their current lifestyle choice and the impact this is having on their children. Clear messages need to be communicated to the parents around the risks to the children in a respectful way that are based on professional social work values but do not lose sight of the children's needs. You might want to check your response against the checklist included in this module.

4. Assessing risk

Your response here should have included reference to good quality assessments.

5. Decision making

Any decision making will be dependent on the outcome of the initial assessment, in particular the information gathered before and during the visit. The assessment needs to be child centred and any recommendations made need to focus on improving the quality of life and outcomes for the two children. This might involve parental support to address the current difficulties experienced by the parents.

Learning activity: Working with highly resistant parents

The role of supervision

Social work professional practice is complex and challenging. Effective professional supervision can play a critical role in ensuring a clear focus on a child's welfare. The 2013 *Working Together* guidance states that:

'Supervision should support professionals to reflect critically on the impact of their decisions on the child and their family. The social worker and their manager should review the plan for the child. Together they should ask whether the help given is leading to a significant positive change for the child and whether the pace of that change is appropriate for the child. Any professional working with vulnerable children should always have access to a manager to talk through their concerns and judgements affecting the welfare of the child. Assessment should remain an ongoing process, with the impact of services informing future decisions around action.' (DfE, 2013 p23)

Keeping safe in practice

Author and trainer Ray Braithwaite offers advice on minimising the negative impacts of hostile situations on the social worker.

Compare your response to Ray's article on how to deal with intimidating families in *Community Care* (Sept 2011).

<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/articles/01/09/2011/117375/how-to.-deal-with-intimidating-families.htm>

You might find other resources on Ray's website helpful in terms of developing safe professional practice: <http://www.aggressionstresstraining.co.uk>

Learning activity: Fact or opinion exercise

1. It is a professional judgement that needs substantiating.
2. Despite the temptation to read this as a fact, it is only a medical opinion. If you are thinking that the word 'consistent' makes it a fact, think about the many incorrect convictions that have been made on the basis of such assertions: sometimes what we think may be consistent later may prove not to be.
3. All that could be safely stated is that 'This is the first known or reported incident of abuse to the child': how does the writer know it was the first 'incident'? Again, if this is what they were told it might have been better to write 'X told me that...'
 - It is both vague and imprecise to make such a statement. It needs to be supported by reasons for reaching this conclusion.
 - Vague; and, as it is written, the relevance of such a statement is debatable, unless it is part of a longer explanation.
 - Better than whom? Evidence?
 - This is one of many misinterpreted research findings: if it were true in respect of sexual abuse, for example, then it would imply that the majority of abusers are female (which is certainly not true) because most of those abused sexually are girls. While a significant proportion of adults who abuse others were themselves abused as children, the finding does not apply the other way round.
4. A 'fact', given the earlier proviso.
5. Again, a 'fact', given the earlier proviso.
6. Vague and imprecise: what does 'appropriate' mean, for example?
7. It is essential to distinguish between 'facts' and 'professional judgements and conclusions' based on observations and research reports. Hypotheses may also need to be recorded; provided it is made clear what information they are based on. Nevertheless, they may still have to be shared if a family member seeks formal access to their file.

8. It is very important not to think that you can 'stick to facts only' – the key task is to substantiate any non-factual information, of which there will always be a great deal.

By 'non-factual' information, we mean 'assessments' and other information about which you will have to make certain judgements – but remember that 'using your professional judgement' does not mean 'being judgmental'.

Module self-assessment exercise: Answer sheet

1. Name two different interview purposes. (2 marks)

- Information seeking interviews
- Information sharing interviews
- Persuasive interviews
- Therapeutic interviews

2. Identify three different non-verbal cues that help to communicate that you are actively listening? (3 marks)

- good eye contact
- head nods
- facial expressions
- open body posture
- silence and stillness

3. When providing feedback to a service user why is it important to 'own' your feedback? (1 mark per reason = maximum 5 marks)

Some of the key reasons you should have identified here include:

- it helps build professional relationships
- it helps with being clear and specific
- it helps with describing actual behaviours
- it helps with focus on the behaviour rather than the person
- it acknowledges that change is possible.

In awarding a mark for this response you might want to re-read pages 10-12 of the module.

4. How can service user feedback support CPD? (1 mark)

Service users have direct experience of what it is like to receive a professional service from both the individual social worker and the agency. These perspectives are valuable within reflective practice as they help with identifying areas for improvement and where to focus CPD. In practice you will need to think about ways of capturing meaningful service user feedback so that it can support your ongoing professional development

5. Identify two examples of participation and two examples of non-participation from the participation ladder. (2 marks)

In awarding a mark for this answer check your examples against Hart's ladder of participation.

6. Name four qualities that children value in their social workers. (4 marks)

In awarding marks for this answer check the qualities you identified against the Minnis and Walker consultation and Thomas and O'Kane research findings. Answers may include:

- time
- relationships, trust and honesty
- active listening
- choice, information and preparation
- activities
- the child's agenda
- serious fun
- risk taking.

7. Identify three possible barriers in communicating with children and the strategies that need to be put in place to address the barrier. (3 marks)

In awarding marks for this answer check your response against the table in the module.

Answers may include:

- time and workload
- hostile/non-cooperative parents
- lack of confidence
- environment
- child's age and development stage
- lack of resources
- lack of support and poor supervision
- competing demands and priorities.

8. What preparations are needed when using an interpreter to communicate with a service user? (1 mark per action = maximum 4 marks)

Some important considerations include:

- allowing enough time
- meeting with the interpreter beforehand to discuss interview content, purpose and to set ground rules
- establishing roles and responsibilities
- practical considerations (correct language, no possible conflict of interest).

In awarding marks for this answer check your response against the checklists in the module.

9. Identify five different reasons why good record keeping is important in professional practice. (5 marks)

In awarding marks for this answer check your response includes five different reasons included in the checklists in the module. Answers may include:

- Evidence that children's needs are met as social workers plan monitor and evaluate their work.
- Provides a clear history and communicates information to other staff and agencies.
- Enabling a continuity of service if the practitioner is ill, unavailable or changed role.
- Protects the child and helps ensure they receive a consistent level of service and support.
- Provides evidence of work and the basis on which key decisions have been made. This can be used as evidence in court proceedings, complaint investigations and as part of internal and external enquires.
- Provides information to monitor, review and evaluate service delivery and the management of resources and aids future planning, thus contributing to an ongoing improvement of practice.
- Provides an audit trail for inspection.

10. Name ten elements that contribute to a good report. (1 mark)

In awarding a mark for this answer check your response includes at least ten different reasons included in the checklists in the module. Answers may include:

- clearly structured
- Plain English
- robust and specific assessments

- defensible decisions
- clear analysis
- balanced strengths and risks
- links with relevant theories (e.g. attachment), recent research findings, best practice models
- considers the views and wishes of the child
- considers the views, wishes and feelings of other family
- an owned holistic assessment of needs and risk
- putting forward a clear proposal and recommendations
- succinct and to the point.

Maximum score = 30 marks

Appendix 1: Decision making within a child's timeframe (DfE, 2012)

- One of the most important issues to confront in promoting better outcomes for abused and neglected children is a mismatch between three timeframes: those of the developing child; those of the courts and those of the local authority.
- The birth of a baby is often a catalyst for change. Children who remain with parents who have not made substantial progress in overcoming adverse behaviour patterns and providing a nurturing home within a few months of their birth may continue to experience maltreatment for lengthy periods.
- Social work decisions concerning permanence are made after lengthy and meticulous deliberations. There is a tendency for delays to occur once a temporary solution has been found and the pressure to resolve a crisis has been relaxed.
- The Children Act 1989 embodies the principle enshrined in human rights legislation and policy that children are best brought up by their own families. Identifying the very few children whose parents will not be able to meet their needs within an appropriate timeframe requires professionals to set aside much of the culture of their training and practice.
- On average, care proceedings take a year to complete; data collected between 2008 and 2011 indicate that courts in only 11 local authority areas met the previous target of 40 weeks.
- Factors that contribute to delays in completing care proceedings include: resource issues; waiting for parenting assessments and the results of attempted placements with parents; resolution of disputes; and changes of plan.
- Repeated assessments of birth parents are a major source of delay, as are sequential assessments of different groups of relatives. These are sometimes undertaken in spite of obvious contraindications. There is a stark contrast between the frequency of parenting assessments and the paucity of paediatric assessments to ascertain the impact of abuse and neglect on children's development.

- The more complex the case, the greater the proliferation of expert assessments and the longer the delay.
- Professionals encounter numerous difficulties in trying to retain a focus on the best interests of the child: attempts to ensure that parents' rights and needs are respected can conflict with those of their children.
- Most children placed for adoption are aged two or older before they reach their adoptive families. This timeframe is at odds with research evidence that indicates that babies who are placed early for adoption are most likely to form secure attachments with new carers.
- Delayed decisions mean that children experience the cumulative jeopardy of lengthy exposure to abuse and neglect; disruption of attachments with temporary carers; unstable placements at home or in care; and prolonged uncertainty about their future.
- There is a relatively short window of opportunity in which decisive actions should be taken to ensure that children at risk of future harm are adequately safeguarded. Delays close off those opportunities. (Brown and Ward, 2013 p72)