

# Teaching, learning and assessing communication skills with children and young people in social work education



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## Introduction

This knowledge review on the teaching, learning and assessing of communication skills with children in social work education was commissioned by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE).

The context for the review is the establishment of the social work degree, underpinned by the Department of Health's *Requirements for social work training*, issued in 2002 and the Department for Education and Skills' *Every child matters: Change for children*, issued in 2004.

Similar requirements exist in Wales and Northern Ireland. The review also notes policy development in children's services.

## Purpose of the review

- To identify the key findings about teaching, learning and assessing communication skills with children in social work education.
- To enable social work educators to apply these findings in the design and delivery of social work programmes.

## Methodology

The review focuses on two main questions:

- How does social work education conceptualise, teach and assess communication skills with children?
- How does social work practice conceptualise and apply knowledge about communication skills with children?

The third question enables comparisons to be made:

- How do allied professional conceptualise and practice communication skills with children?

For the literature review, an initial search of electronic databases revealed a very limited research literature in this area, and so the search was widened to include sources that reported findings on effective communication with children and young people in social work practice as well as education. This generated 27,539

records. Screening ensured that only records that had related to direct communication between social worker and children in social work education or practice contexts as their central focus, and reported original relevant empirical research findings, were included.

For the practice survey, 73 higher education institutes (HEIs) provided social work education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland at the time of the survey, summer 2005. The population of HEIs was opportunistically sampled, depending on availability and response, using information from websites, programme handbooks, telephone questionnaires and site visits.

## Findings

The main finding of both the literature review and the practice survey was that communication skills with children is not a distinct topic in social work research or education, and a common understanding about what makes communication skilled, and what should be taught and how, does not exist. Few examples of effective practice were identified.

The difficulty of teaching specialist skills on generic courses preparing students to work in a unitary profession is a long-standing dilemma, and this is reflected in the current findings. There is no general expectation that all students

undergoing generic training will develop communication skills with children, and no clarity about the range and level of skill required exists. This is in spite of the fact that all social workers, including those who work primarily with adults, will have direct contact with children and should ascertain their views (see [www.scie.org.uk/publications/resourceguides/rg01.pdf](http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/resourceguides/rg01.pdf)). Communication skills with children are not routinely taught as a discrete topic within the social work degree, in either the taught or practice placement elements; communication with adults is often prioritised in the former and case management and risk assessment in the latter. The teaching is often embedded within other modules, and there is no guarantee that qualifying students will have learnt or been assessed on communication skills with children, even when they have had placements in children's services.

Currently, responsibility for the teaching of this area is often dispersed among academic staff, which further hampers the development of this area of the curriculum.

The direct participation of children and young people in social work education is entirely compatible with the value base of social work training and can have a powerful impact on practice. However, although children are becoming actively involved in teaching and assessment, this is usually more opportunistic

than strategic, and some academic staff are uncertain about the effectiveness and legitimacy of involving children in this way.

The literature review reveals contrasting perspectives about the nature of childhood, which have not been reconciled in social work research and education, and which impacts on the methods used to work with children. On one hand, children are regarded as capable, intentional and self-determining, on the other, as vulnerable, and in need of protection and care. Students need the opportunity to understand and critically reflect on these contrasting views.

There are also contrasting perspectives about the nature of appropriate learning aims and teaching methods, which are linked to the dilemma outlined above. Some courses focus on the therapeutic nature of communication by developing students' personal communication capacity, for example, the ability to build trust, empathy and child centeredness, and to respond to indirect and unspoken communication.

Others concentrate on developing technical skills, for example, the ability to convey information, and to listen and to use creative and nonverbal techniques. Some teaching takes the stance that communication is facilitated by enabling children's active participation through empowerment and advocacy. There is evidence that all approaches are important and that

developing personal communication capacity is required to underpin the acquisition of technical skills and empowerment techniques.

The survey of allied professional education, for example teachers, paediatricians, nurses and occupational therapists, identified a varied range of approaches to the teaching and assessment of communication skills with children, and examples of innovative practice that could transfer to social work education.

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