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

SCIE Knowledge reviews are designed to provide social work educators and students with the resources to improve the teaching and learning on qualifying social work programmes.

This knowledge review is one of a series supporting the new social work degree. It follows a previous SCIE knowledge review, Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education, which identified the need to examine communication skills with children in more detail. The intended audience is primarily social work educators and students.

This publication is available in an alternative format upon request.
Teaching, learning and assessing communication skills with children and young people in social work education

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Children who were consulted for this review said that they wanted social workers to do certain things for them such as listen, explain, and get things done, and, as one small child said approvingly of her social worker:

‘If I was confused she would unconfuse me.’

They also wanted social workers to behave in an understanding way, to be fair, kind, trustworthy and reliable.

Talking with and listening to children is a core social work skill, and we hope that this review will put the topic firmly on the agenda, and be a valuable resource for social work educators, students and all those concerned with training the next generations of social workers. We also hope the review will form the basis of further curriculum development and teaching and assessment methods in this aspect of practice.

Other reviews in this series have included work on the teaching and learning of law, partnership working and assessment skills. Future work will include resources on interprofessional education and the learning and teaching of human growth and development.

We would like to thank the authors who undertook this review, which has made a valuable contribution to a previously overlooked topic.

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Executive summary

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\(^1\) and the Department for Education and Skills’ Every child matters: Change for children, issued in 2004.\(^3,4\) 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). 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 non-verbal 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.
1

Introduction

1.1 Context

The teaching and learning of skills in communication have been restored to the heart of social work education. 1 The social work award curriculum in England must now include ‘communication skills with children’, as well as with adults and others with particular communication needs (1, p 3). Similar requirements apply in Wales and Northern Ireland. In the meantime, long-standing concerns about inadequate professional practice with children have been intensified by the death of Victoria Climbie, yet another ‘abandoned, unheard and unnoticed’ child (2, p6). A major programme of organisational reform and workforce development designed to produce ‘change for children’ 3, 4 is now underway. As part of the newly designated ‘children’s services workforce’, social workers are now additionally expected to employ a ‘common core’ of skills and knowledge in their work with children, 5 which includes effective communication and engagement with children and young people.

Despite this strong emphasis, uncertainty remains about exactly what should be learned at the qualifying level in social work education. This applies to the way in which the teaching and assessment of specific skills in communication with children is most effectively organised and delivered within a generic curriculum. It also concerns the way such skills are understood and the methods of teaching and assessment used to enable their development in students. What level these skills are taught at is also an issue.

1.2 Knowledge review

This knowledge review has been commissioned by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) to help inform discussions by social work

* From here on, we shall use the term ‘child’ or ‘children’ as shorthand for ‘children and young people’ merely for the purposes of brevity.
programme providers about curriculum design and teaching and assessment methods in preparing social work students for effective practice in relation to communication with children. The review has employed two main methods for gathering evidence on this topic:

- a systematic review of social work practice and education research
- a survey of current practice in social work education.

We have approached this task in the recognition that knowledge about the effectiveness of all aspects of social work education remains extremely limited. Richards et al conclude from their systematic review of teaching generic communication skills in social work practice that there is still a need to ‘develop our understanding of what constitutes effectiveness in relation to communication skills’ and to understand ‘what factors promote the transfer of learning from communication skills training into practice settings and into work with different service-user and carer groups’ (7, p 419; see also 8). This may be in part because social work practice itself is a contested field, with no settled agreement about what might count as a good outcome to be tested empirically. Given that not much is yet known, this review focuses on the way the topic is thought about and understood within agency and education settings as well as on the available evidence from specific studies. Empirical findings are linked to the conceptual frameworks that inform what is done in both settings.

Starting from this understanding we agreed three review questions. The primary aim of this review is to establish the effectiveness of social work education in teaching and assessing skilled communication with children at the qualifying level. Therefore we first asked:

What is the current state of knowledge about the way social work educators think about, teach and assess communication skills with children and about the effectiveness of this aspect of qualifying social work education?

This question was applied equally to our research review and to the practice survey.

A secondary aim was to underpin these findings on social work education by reporting evidence on the use and effectiveness of communication
with children in social work practice. We used the following question to focus this aspect of our review:

What is the current state of knowledge about the way that communication skills with children are thought about and applied in social work practice, and about the effectiveness of this aspect of practice?

In this case we only drew on our research review and made no attempt to survey social work practice itself.

Finally, our third aim was to make some comparison between approaches to learning and teaching communication skills on social work programmes and those developed by allied professions. We used the following question to focus this aspect of our enquiry:

What is the current state of knowledge about the way educators in allied professions think about, teach and assess communication skills with children, and about the effectiveness of this aspect of professional education?

In this case, available resources allowed only for a limited and illustrative survey of practice, the details and results of which are reported in our main practice survey.

1.3 Defining communication

At its most basic, it might be said that communication is the act or process by which information is transmitted. Information can include facts, thoughts and feelings and can be conveyed in various ways, verbally and non-verbally. This process can be direct or indirect.

However, it is the mutual exchange of information between individuals that is normally associated with effective communication. The expectation here is that communication involves reciprocity, or a two-way process of sharing information. For this to happen, a common language – words, emotions, behaviours, symbols, signs – is required. The information shared will need to be accurate and authentic in order to move towards the goals of shared understanding and (perhaps but not necessarily) shared agreement.

By implication, ineffective communication will involve a failure of
one or more of these aspects. Information might not be exchanged effectively because of problems with transmitting or receiving it. For example, an adult could use words that a child does not understand or a child might refuse to accept information that they find scary. Information provided might be partial or inaccurate, and the motivation and commitment to free and open exchange might vary. Shared understanding is unlikely where there are differences of opinion or fear and mistrust. Other differences – for instance, of age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, culture and class, language and the like – can impede mutual understanding. This is especially the case where there is an imbalance of power. Personal assumptions and beliefs on both sides, open or unconscious, will affect communication.

Communication has been called a ‘two-way street’, 9 emphasising the responsibility of practitioners to have sufficient competence to enable children to be effectively involved in the process. However, beyond these basic definitions and assumptions, it was apparent from the outset that no single view has been established about what counts as skilled communication with children in a social work context or even about the way social workers should think about childhood itself. Our review questions have enabled us to explore how social work and social work education have approached the task of holding in mind contrasting perspectives on the nature of the review topic.

The traditional approach, in the UK at least, has been to emphasise the distinctive needs of children and especially their vulnerability due to a combination of developmental factors and adverse experience.10 Latterly, however, this perspective has been challenged in various ways as the active intentions and rights of children, as well as their specific needs and welfare, have received greater attention. For example, in children’s services policy the emphasis is now on informing and consulting children as active participants in the design and use of services as much as on counselling them as vulnerable ‘clients’ in need of personal care and support.3

To develop this initial frame of reference for understanding communication with children in social work, we began our enquiry with two sets of consultations through our advisory group.
1.4 Initial consultations and differing perspectives

We first worked with a group of 20 children (aged 6–14 years) to get advice on how best to define our terms.* Two main points emerged. First, the children felt that effective communication in social work had something to do with being as well as with doing, about how you were as a person as well as what you did as a social worker. They told us how important it was to them for practitioners to be ‘kind’, ‘friendly’, ‘gentle’, ‘fair’, ‘respectful’, ‘trustworthy’, ‘patient’, ‘reliable’, ‘telling the truth’ and so on. They also described what it was that adults should do to communicate effectively. This included ‘listening’, ‘understanding’, ‘explaining well’ and ‘getting things done’. Second, the process of consultation itself emphasised the need for practitioners to find creative ways to involve and consult with children, especially young children and/or those with communication impairments.

A second consultation was with the adults (parents, professionals, researchers and educators) on our advisory group, who felt effective communication might vary according to the reasons why social workers were involved with children in the first place. Two contrasting themes emerged. Some advisers emphasised ethical commitments such as ‘participation’, ‘involvement’, ‘choice’ and ‘rights’, including the right of children to have informed social workers who could convey that information to them. Others went for personal qualities and relational aspects of communication such as ‘non-judgemental’, ‘trust’, ‘support’, ‘attunement’ and a concern with ‘the unconscious’.

These perspectives were unsurprisingly related to the professional roles of the advisers. For instance, those involved in advocacy work tended to be influenced by a children’s rights perspective and by a primary view of children as ‘social actors’ (for example11). They then put most value on seeing children as people in their own right and emphasised the role of communication in facilitating choice. This seems close to what has elsewhere been called ‘empowerment-based practice’12 with children. In

* We worked with three groups of children and young people, who provided consultation and advice to Triangle and, through Triangle, to other organisations. The groups were diverse in terms of age range (3–24), ethnicity, understanding and communication method.
contrast, those in agency roles demanding care and/or control were more likely to see communication as a means of achieving these aims. Echoing the ‘corporate parenting’ approach to practice, they were primarily concerned with how ‘adverse experiences’ (10, p xv) might limit children’s communicative capacities.

Social work has always drawn on both therapeutic approaches to communication and information-giving and consultative methods. It has developed a distinctive role that has been expected to incorporate rather than simply replicate skills from therapy, advice services and advocacy. An underpinning question for this knowledge review has been: can a set of core conditions for effective communication be identified in a changing practice context, in terms of both the image of children and expectations about the nature of the social work relationship?

This review begins with this question before turning to the evidence currently available to encourage different approaches to supporting skilled communication in social work education. Our intention is to provide social work programme providers with further information about what aspects of communication might need to be taught, in order to inform decisions about what might be the most effective and appropriate methods of teaching and assessment within qualifying social work education.
2.1 Methodology

We begin our research review with a brief outline of the method used to identify, map and analyse sources. A systematic procedure was used, comprising three main stages:

• a search strategy designed to identify a wide range of sources in which reference was made to communication with children in social work practice and education
• a screening and selection process using inclusion and exclusion criteria, which selected sources of specific relevance to the topic and were consistent with a primary focus on presenting and reviewing the available empirical evidence
• a process of mapping and analysis that enabled a thematic analysis of the resulting research findings, underpinned by in-depth reports of studies employing particular methodological rigour.

2.1.1 Search strategy

Our initial search of databases confirmed the expectation that there exists a very limited research literature on learning, teaching and assessing communication skills with children in qualifying social work education. To maximise the opportunity to learn about the way communication skills in social work with children are being thought about, practised and taught, the search was widened. The aim was to include sources reporting findings on effective communication in social work practice that might inform curriculum design, as well as directly report any effective methods of teaching communication skills identified within a limited literature.
The final search strategy was therefore inclusive*, being composed of three broadly defined groups of terms relating to:

- children and young people
- the social work role, task and context
- forms of communication.

We included studies that were published in the English language since 1985 and had as a central focus direct communication between social workers and children (aged 0–18 years) in any social work education or practice context.

We excluded works that reported a particular method of intervention rather than the effectiveness of communication within that method, as well as studies that presented specialist skills unsuited to qualifying level practice or that had been made redundant by changing policy or practice requirements.

Employing this inclusive approach and searching within 14 databases specified by SCIE, we identified 27,539 citations, including duplications, in which some combination of these terms appeared. These were primarily journal articles.

2.1.2 Screening and selection process

The screening and selection of references for mapping and analysis took place at three points in the review process:

- Initial screening: of the citation abstracts read, those that were included were published in the English language and had as a central focus direct communication between social workers and children (aged 0–18 years) in any social work education or practice context. Initial screening eliminated the vast majority of these studies. The removal of duplicate citations reduced the number still further, while additional citations uncovered in the process were added. No further handsearching was undertaken. This left 526 citations.

* See Appendix 1 for full details of the search terms employed in each database.
• Further screening: additional inclusion and exclusion criteria were then employed. Of the studies included at this stage were those that reported original empirical research findings. These empirical studies included replicable evaluative studies and descriptive and analytical studies in which findings from primary research were reported. Also included were studies that provided conceptual and policy-based accounts and analyses of social work communication with children. Excluded were accounts and textbooks in which advice on applying communication skills was given. In addition, a number of citations could not be obtained in time for inclusion. This process left 270 citations for reading and keywording.

• Keywording: the keywording process enabled a more rigorous methodological categorisation of sources, specifically identifying robust empirical studies suitable for in-depth analysis. Only those references that reported relevant, replicable evaluative studies, with sufficient research data presented to allow methodologies and findings to be isolated and categorised, were included for in-depth data extraction. All such studies evaluating communication skills in social work education were included. Of the 52 sources keyworded, there were 31 studies reporting empirical findings but only six studies that met this tighter inclusion criterion. In the case of social work practice, no relevant, replicable studies isolating and evaluating communication skills as an aspect of practice in its own right were identified. In the light of the research team’s commitment to the active valuation of the experience of children, and in a context of limited resources, only those empirical studies of social work practice that reported the views of children themselves in relation to social work communication were selected for in-depth analysis. Of the 218 sources keyworded, 123 studies reported empirical findings but only 12 studies met these specific criteria.

* Keywording is the process by which studies can be categorised for further analysis in respect of criteria related to both the topic and the nature of the research evidence and concepts presented. See Appendix 2 for details of the screening and selection process.
2.1.3 Mapping and analysis process

As well as distinguishing between sources concerning social work practice and those reporting social work education, and identifying studies in each case for in-depth data analysis, the keywording process sought to create a map to structure the research review as a whole. In particular, an attempt was made to categorise the field in four main ways:

- by age and characteristics of the children referred to
- by the social work practice setting considered
- by the perspective taken on the nature of childhood
- by the purpose and mode of communication addressed.

In the event, while the keywording process enabled the identification of different types of study for analysis, it was not able to provide a sufficiently robust framework for the broader analysis undertaken for the review (see Appendix 3). In particular, it was not possible consistently to identify the age and characteristics of the children referred to in the studies, nor to find sufficient common definitions and descriptions in the literature to produce robust \textit{a priori} categorisations of the purposes and modes of communication.

As a result, the mapping of the literature undertaken was used only as an initial basis for an analysis that seeks to identify and link differing conceptualisations of aspects of the topic and to develop core themes. This approach is consistent with the contested nature of communication, childhood, the social work role in relation to the task of communicating with children in practice and the nature of the aims and methods of teaching communication skills in social work education. It is also appropriate given the diverse range of studies available for review in this emergent field of practice and research.

The thematic analysis that follows draws on the full range of conceptual papers and empirical studies selected for review, with a specific emphasis given to the evidence presented in the 18 relevant, replicable evaluative studies identified.
2.2 Research message 1: What counts as effective communication with children in social work practice?

2.2.1 Sources of evidence

Our search strategy identified 218 *social work practice* citations suitable for inclusion and analysis. Of these references, 123 were works that reported empirical findings consistent with our definition. The other 95 were descriptive and/or conceptual papers. Of the empirical studies, only 12 met our inclusion criteria for in-depth data extraction and quality analysis. Full details of the focus, method and findings of each study can be found in Appendix 7.

As these studies and their findings address disparate aspects of social work communication with children, they are integrated into the thematic analysis (identified as ‘DE’ in the text). We found no coherent body of robust research evidence that would enable us to suggest that any one aspect of social work communication should be emphasised over another. This is because the concept of ‘communication skills’, so far as it relates to social work with children, has not yet been established as a research topic in its own terms. While studies on a variety of social work interventions with children can be found, this is not the case for communication *per se*. As a result, conclusions about the strength of findings in relation to any of the themes identified in this section of the review can only be derived from the frequency of their reiteration across the wide range of studies included here.

When considering the findings reported below, it is important to remember that our search strategy was designed only to include citations in which communication between social workers and children (aged 0–18 years) in any social work practice context was a *major focus* of the study. Our search was not intended to include studies within the much wider body of research on methods of social work practice with children unless they specifically addressed the effectiveness of communication within those methods. Nor was the search strategy designed to capture indirect communication with children – for example, through parents and carers. Where the search identified studies of communication with children by other professionals, such as therapists or advocates, these were screened out unless the findings were made relevant and presented...
to a social work audience. Specialist communication skills, such as forensic interviewing for criminal proceedings, were similarly excluded as they were not relevant to the main purpose of this part of the research review. This purpose was to inform the development of the qualifying award level social work curriculum, and what ought to be learned by students, by identifying what might count as effective communication with children in practice.

2.2.2 Thematic analysis

2.2.2.1 Conceptualising ‘skilled communication’ in social work practice

Two core themes emerged from this first part of the research review: that no single definition of communication is consistently used in the reported research on social work practice with children; and that no shared assumption exists about what makes communication skilled. The majority of the studies reviewed present communication as a complex process, subject to a wide range of influences. Different types of information are conveyed, directly and indirectly, between social workers and children, and in various ways. Unconscious and indirect communications as well as intended expressions of feelings, ideas and experiences are considered in many studies, particularly those that discuss in-depth ‘clinical’ or therapeutic practice and/or are written from a more psychodynamic standpoint. In other studies, these ‘below the surface’ dynamics are not mentioned.

However, it is also apparent that a range of factors – whether contextual, structural, individual, cultural and/or interpersonal – can be identified that inhibit effective communication from either side of the social worker/child relationship. These factors appear to result from a variety of things: social workers’ perceptions of children; children’s social and legal status; the often sensitive nature of the material under discussion; the capacities and experiences of both social worker and child; the social work role and context; and the inequality of power relations inherent within these. Explicitly taking these factors into account enabled many writers to consider how seemingly simple communicative tasks, however defined, might be made more complex. This allowed consideration of
various ways in which communication might be facilitated by social workers.

We begin by reporting on the three main inhibitors to communication that emerged from the thematic analysis of these studies. These were:

- polarised perspectives on the nature of childhood
- the influence of the social work role and context
- the impact of oppression and discrimination.

We then go on to consider the evidence presented in respect of the knowledge, skills and values of social workers that might facilitate communication. As we have reported above, we found no discrete bodies of robust empirical findings that enabled us to demonstrate conclusively that any one element or approach to communication should be preferred over any other in any situation. Instead the aim here is to try to identify a number of the best ‘core conditions and specific aspects’ of skilled and effective communication in social work practice with children in the diverse range of research evidence currently available. This discussion is intended to further illuminate the distinction made by the children we consulted at the outset, between how social workers are as people, taking account of their values, ethical commitments and personal capacities (‘being’), and what they do as professionals – that is, their actions, technical capabilities and skills (‘doing’). The importance of certain types of underpinning knowledge and understanding (‘knowing’) is also briefly emphasised as this too emerged from the analysis. However, this aspect is not discussed further as it will form the basis of a subsequent SCIE review.

2.2.2.2 Inhibitors of communication between social workers and children

Polarised perspectives on the nature of childhood: there is a common assumption in the studies reviewed that social workers need to take into account three distinctive developmental aspects of childhood that might have an effect on the nature of communication. These are:

- the age and stage of development of the child
- any inherited traits, capabilities or impairments
how the child had been affected by their (adverse) experiences.

However, the implication of the developmental status of children for communication is approached very differently in the literature. As some academic researchers have suggested, polarised thinking seems to be widespread in social work practice, many workers having adopted either a ‘rights’ or a ‘rescue’ stance. In fact, this thinking can equally be detected in much of the research itself. In essence, while some authors assume communication is impeded primarily by the impact of the age, impairment and adverse experience of children, others argue that, as children have a right to a say, the assumption must be that any restriction on communication must result instead from a lack of commitment and/or skill on the part of the social worker.

Approximately one half of the empirical studies were written from the former stance, particularly those reporting case studies of communication within clinical and therapeutic contexts. Children tended to be presented as vulnerable subjects, and accounts rarely considered the way in which communication might also be enhanced by approaching them as capable and intentional. This affected the kind of information given to children and the extent to which they were actively involved in and consulted about decisions and services.

This emphasis on vulnerability rather than capability was criticised in a number of papers, conceptual as well as empirical. One suggestion was that the disregard for children’s rights implied by a focus of their welfare left social workers with too much discretion to determine at what age and in which circumstances children’s views and intentions ought to be actively elicited by skilled communication. This could enhance rather than diminish child vulnerability.

In particular, communication could be impeded because workers simply made less effort to use child-centred methods, depending instead on those that were overly adult or professional-centred, verbal or narrowly focused. This seemed particularly true for children with impairments, contradicting specialist advice to: use children’s primary mode of communication where possible; accept assistance in communication from those who know the children well; use observation to make sense of children’s more indirect communications; use creative and play-based methods; and always to appreciate the children’s frustrations and show respect for them.
Consistent with this view, children themselves in a range of settings reported their need and right to be informed, listened to and consulted. These included care leavers, those in adoptive homes and those involved in care proceedings. It was also reported by children who had witnessed or experienced domestic violence, those with learning disabilities, young carers (cited in 24) and children involved in child protection processes. Eight of the 12 studies that met the inclusion criteria for in-depth data extraction and analysis reported similar findings (see Appendix 2).

On the other hand, while clinical and therapeutic papers were less alert to children’s rights, they were much more likely to report the indirect as well as direct ways in which children communicate, especially in the face of adversity. This kind of communication received little or no attention in studies presenting children as capable and intentional.

The implication here is that social work practice (and research) that adopts a polarised position, with too narrow a focus on either vulnerability or capability, might run the risk of limiting communication. This was certainly the view that emerged from our consultation group of children when these emerging findings were explored with them midway through the review. The children (aged 6–9 years) wanted a right to both consultation and involvement and advice and care. According to them, if adults ignored the need for children to be consulted, the latter would have ‘a sad life’ and adults might ignore any danger that children were in. Nonetheless children are inexperienced and, without care and advice, might make unwise and regrettable decisions. Trust in adults develops when those adults both consult and advise, respecting capability and vulnerability alike.

The social work role and context: communication between an adult and a child in general is not the same as communication between a social worker and a child. It might be expected that trust is much harder to establish and avoidance far more likely when children feel that they have been misused by adults and where they feel coerced into relationships with social workers. Of course, these are common experiences for the children we are concerned with here. Whether the imposition was by parents/guardians eager for a particular intervention to take place or by the courts, the review found evidence to support the expectation that involvement by compulsion leaves children feeling particularly
Fear, suspicion and hostility can result. Some research interprets this through the psychological concepts of resistance and ambivalence, for which there is some robust evidence. Other papers simply note the erosion of trust in relationships with adults that results directly from the experience of abuse or neglect. Similarly, things could be made worse for children where those abusive or neglecting adults had power or were perceived to have power, just like social workers; in these cases, the children’s fear could relate to the consequences as well as the causes of involvement.

There is evidence that this inhibits communication in relation to specific aspects of practice, such as ascertaining a child’s view under the pressure of an externally imposed deadline, including completion of an initial or core assessment within the assessment framework timescales. There is also evidence that supports the expectation that children will deflect questions that they suspect (often accurately) disguise a hidden agenda.

The administrative demands of working in multiagency networks and providing packages of care can also impede effective communication in ‘direct practice’ with children. Studies report social work complaints that these demands divert ‘time and attention away from personal contact and towards filling in forms and making telephone calls’ (p 22). Case management and routine practice, especially in statutory roles exercised in mainstream practice settings, is said to prevail. This has led to the assertion that traditional ‘depth’ communications with children have been diminished and downgraded to ‘surface’ interactions, leaving many social workers feeling that they do not have the time, skills, confidence or mandate to work directly with children. There is stronger evidence that, in such settings, children’s voices have not been heard well enough.

The experience of oppression: the studies informed wholly or in part by a children’s rights perspective actively address the disempowerment and oppression of children that results from their subordinate legal and social status as minors. These papers are largely small-scale, qualitative studies or accounts. Where social work practice fails to recognise this, communication can be inhibited through the perpetuation of oppressive attitudes and assumptions. Children’s relatively powerless position can
be reinforced when social work undertaken from an expert, interpretive stance fails to allow them to explore, define and express their own experience.  

A number of papers discuss issues for children from particular minority groups. For example, evidence is available to show that social workers who do not appreciate the effects of racism on black identity development and on emotional and psychological health can oppress and silence black and minority ethnic children. Tensions and misunderstandings can arise from culturally different communicative and relational styles or the worker’s lack of knowledge about children’s cultural or religious norms. It is apparent that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth can feel unsafe and be wary of open communication about their needs, views and experiences where they experience judgements rather than acceptance from social workers. Oppressive language in verbal and written communications and a failure to demonstrate an awareness of the impact of heterosexism and homophobia on young people are consistently identified in this respect. 

There is considerable documentation of accounts from disabled adults of ‘disablist’ approaches from professionals. The experience of oppressive practice as such is less well researched with disabled children and young people, but recent work shows that a ‘social model’ perspective is essential if practice is to be inclusive rather than prejudicial and discriminatory. Equating disability with impairment itself, rather than with prejudice and discrimination and the disabling effects of these, is the basis of oppressive practice.

2.2.2.3 Identifying the core conditions and specific aspects of effective communication between children and social workers

Our review has uncovered no common approach to what counts as skilled communication in social work with children. However, it has enabled us to identify a number of core conditions and specific aspects of practice that are, in one social work context or another, associated with effective communication. By ‘core conditions’ we mean that combination of professional values and personal commitments that underpin skilled engagement with children. By ‘specific aspects’ we mean those skills and
techniques for which we have uncovered some evidence of effectiveness, however indicative.

Once again we must stress that, while this thematic analysis is based in a wide range of empirical sources, very few of these have employed rigorous and robust methods. These latter studies continue to be identified in the following sections as ‘DE’.

2.2.2.4 Core condition 1: Ethical and emotional engagement in social work

The heart of effective communication in this context appears to be the personal and professional commitment of the social worker to the child. There is evidence that this is best seen as a dual process of engagement.

First, the demonstration in practice of an ethical commitment to the principle of respecting children in their own right and enabling their active participation is positively endorsed by our findings. Second, the importance of a capacity and commitment in the practitioner to engage emotionally with a child, and thereby convey understanding and care, was widely evidenced. Where these commitments were demonstrated in practice children reported favourably on their communications with social workers. The key outcomes here were the achievement of anti-oppressive communication and the building of trust, on which basis a relationship of reciprocity and mutuality could be established.

Anti-oppressive communication: strong evidence from DE studies has been presented for an approach that empowers children by including them and maximising their participation. Different ways were suggested of achieving this. For example, in a therapeutic context the use of a non-directive play approach was said to offer philosophical respect for various children’s rights – to information, to maintain psychological defences, to choose the focus of activity within the session and to decline to participate. Such sharing of power was felt to be particularly vital for children who had been disempowered through sexual abuse.

Strengths-based approaches were also said to empower children, by drawing on strengths that may have previously been missed or ignored rather than identifying the possible lack of capability of children due to assumed deficits associated with childhood status. Such methods
were suggested as being particularly useful when communication was mandatory, such as in youth offending work, as they did not reinforce the other negative messages the children were receiving in their lives, and in communications with black children who generally received negative messages within a racist society.\textsuperscript{81}

It was suggested that the cultural and religious needs and preferences of children were taken into account through culturally competent practice.\textsuperscript{80–83,100} However, communications with black and minority ethnic children also required an anti-racist perspective, which would mean that social work students had to be taught non-white-centric views of children and the effects of racism on black identity development and emotional and psychological health, and given a social and structural analysis of black people’s history and status.\textsuperscript{74–79} Courses had to challenge the underlying racist belief systems of students and their values at personal, cultural and social levels. With both cultural competence and anti-racist approaches, students needed to develop their self-awareness through experiential learning, including challenging and reflecting on their own identities.\textsuperscript{79,82}

Similarly, social and structural perspectives within a strong anti-oppressive framework were also necessary to ensure that LGB youth felt sufficiently safe to communicate.\textsuperscript{84–88} Because of their experiences of homophobia and heterosexism, they needed social workers to demonstrate acceptance through avoiding oppressive language in verbal and written communications, having LGB literature available and demonstrating their knowledge of the impact of heterosexism and homophobia on young people (for example, why they might be wary of disclosing their sexuality). Student social workers were said to learn experientially through challenging and being challenged on their attitudes and behaviour, as well as needing to be taught the effects of oppression and the discriminatory legal framework on identity development and ‘coming out’. Trotter\textsuperscript{88} and Logan\textsuperscript{86} felt this was inadequately addressed within social work training.

**Building trust:** numerous papers explicitly reported on the importance of a social worker establishing the child’s trust before effective communication could be achieved.\textsuperscript{20, 40, 47, 53–58, 60–63, 101} Some of these, together with others, showed how a child’s trust was associated with practitioners who could be sincere, genuine, congruent and respectful, and could
show humanity through expressions of enthusiasm, warmth, friendliness, humour, care and/or concern for the children. 21, 40, 45, 52, 53, 56, 102–111 Such factors were felt to be demonstrated by demeanour and attitude, which depended ‘on the person more than what they do’ (112, p 11). These findings were strengthened by four of the more methodologically rigorous studies. 62, 91, 93, 94 DE

Several authors commented on how social workers had to be particularly predictable, consistent and dependable with children who had had previous unpredictable and unsafe experiences, in order for trust to build 56, 62, 64, 73 (DE, so a strengthened finding). Twelve spoke of children’s need to ‘feel safe’ in the intervention and subsequent relationship. 47, 52–54, 56, 61, 63, 73, 84, 113–115 While firm boundaries might be necessary, some children particularly appreciated workers who were flexible about being available to them when they were needed. 24, 62–64, 91, 114, 115 These personal qualities were linked by six authors to what has been termed ‘use of self’; 47, 52, 60, 106, 116, 117 defined as social workers needing to be informed, thoughtful and purposeful, requiring reflection on personal experience 117 and having ‘intuitive as well as conscious’ self-awareness (116, p 198).

Finally, a number of papers indicated how trust and safety were established through an engaged relationship or working alliance that became the conduit through which the tasks and aims of social workers with children were achieved. 20, 36, 52, 63, 65, 84, 85, 104, 115, 118–121 This was especially important in the process of ‘joining’ with involuntary adolescent service users. 48, 51, 122 This particular finding was strengthened by two data-extracted studies 49, 93 (both DE).

There is evidence that the current context of social work practice – where social workers are becoming case managers whose face-to-face work with children of all ages is being squeezed by other demands on their time 68 – does not support the forming of such relationships. Social workers are even said to have lost confidence in the value of such relationships. 72 This was not welcomed by children who felt that ‘too many social workers remain behind their desks’ and that there is ‘too little personal involvement’ (40, p 326). Concern about this has led to calls for social workers to revive a ‘relationship-based’ practice tradition as even procedural case management tasks or very brief interventions are believed to be more successful if carried out in a more engaged, relational and therapeutic manner: 21, 63, 68, 72, 121, 123 ‘even a single interview can ...
if sensitively conducted, give the worker insights into the meaning of events and relationships to the individual client’ (\textsuperscript{72}, p \textsuperscript{63}).

**Using depth and surface processes:** how relationships of trust are used in practice to facilitate communication depends on the approach taken to what is being communicated. Taking communication to be the act or process by which information is transmitted, the question arises about what counts as information when a social worker communicates with a child. Effective communication can take place at a surface level, for example, when a certain fact or opinion or decision is explained to a child and understood by them, or vice versa. However, arguably a deeper level of communication almost invariably takes place at the same time, with feelings as well as thoughts being communicated effectively or not. While the active use of feelings in communication is seen as largely inappropriate or irrelevant when the child is viewed as a ‘service user’ with rights to participation and choice (see above), from the therapeutic perspective in social work these depth processes are seen as the essence of effective communication and mutual understanding.

Studies written from this psychotherapeutic stance draw, in most cases, on a different source of evidence than those informed by a commitment to report the views of children themselves about what has ‘worked’ for them. Instead, the interpretations and assumptions of the ‘expert’ practitioner are privileged.\textsuperscript{107} None of these studies could be included for in-depth data analysis.

Clinical case studies, often reporting practice in the US where this tradition remains strong, provide the main sources. However, it is also apparent that the emotional dynamics of the engagement with children emerge in mainstream social work practice. One UK study\textsuperscript{61} asking social workers about their experiences of ‘direct work’ with children found that ‘depth’ processes had emerged, even if this had not been intended. As a result, some social workers had felt unprepared and insufficiently skilled to make use of these dynamics to enhance communication. External constraints also impeded the relationship as practitioners were under pressure to progress their work so that decisions could be made by panels, conferences and the like. This was counterproductive as the children felt unsafe and unheard and effective engagement was undermined. The implication here is that the emotional content of encounters with children must always be considered by social workers, who will need to
be trained and supported in ways that enable them to be sensitive to children’s cues and manage the impact of the work.

Where therapeutic processes within the relationship are considered, attention is drawn to the use of transference and counter-transference, the provision of a ‘holding’ and containing environment within which children feel safe to communicate their thoughts and feelings freely and the use of mirroring, empathy and attunement to create engagement and allow meaning to be negotiated rather than interpreted. Some papers appear to have drawn on what Clare Winnicott has termed the ‘third object’ or ‘third thing’, when considering how an activity or object in which a child is interested can help establish a connection with them by supplying a non-threatening reference point outside the worker–child dyad. These ‘objects’ included the use of computer games, pets or farm animals or, indeed, any shared interests.

Although much attention was given to social workers beginning and forming relationships with children, we found only two papers that specifically addressed the meaning of ending the relationship. One advised that it was important to clarify what had been covered and what would be shared with others in order to help children ‘close down’ and return to their usual ways of coping. Practitioners were reminded that some children might have become over-attached to their workers, particularly where there were issues of insecure attachments, and this needed sensitive handling. Another introduced a ‘memory book’ to be completed together by worker and child, which would include a review of the reasons why the worker and child initially came together, the issues that were dealt with, what was accomplished, the reason for termination and the meaning of termination for both the child and the worker.

Some resource issues were highlighted when the ways in which social workers could use relationships and depth processes were considered: uninterrupted time with children away from other work pressures, which was required to establish a safe and relaxed environment; preparation for the work; reliable commitment; and reflection on it afterwards to make sense of children’s communications. Access to skilled supervision was also considered important to enable workers to feel skilled and confident.

It is important to note that the evidence does not yet show consistently in what particular combination the dual emphasis on ethical commit-
ment and emotional engagement should be employed in any practice role or context. The majority of the studies reviewed emphasised the significance of the emotional availability of social workers in effective engagements with children. However, this may simply be a result of the fact that our search identified more studies reporting practice within a therapeutic framework than those grounded more centrally in practice concerned with consultation or advocacy. It may also be the case that variables such as the age of the children and the practice context can affect the emphasis. For example, five studies largely reporting practice with young people in community settings found that substantial proportions of their samples valued being accorded autonomy as highly or more highly than emotional support. The crucial importance to effective communication of a respectful and caring stance is routinely shown in these studies. It would be helpful if future ones were designed to explore in more detail the relationship between the two in different practice contexts.

2.2.2.5 Core condition 2: Child-centred communication

By child-centred communication, we mean the need for social workers to adapt their communicative style to what Malaguzzi calls the ‘hundred languages of childhood’ (141, in 29). Directly talking with children appears to be a widespread form of communication. It was the primary mode in 82 studies in this review and is considered appropriate and necessary at times to achieve tasks. However, as we have suggested, social workers could inhibit and impair children’s capabilities when they use methods of communication that were too adult-centred, task-focused or verbally dependent, particularly when working with adolescents or in therapeutic work. There is some sound empirical evidence that a child-centred approach is more effective.

In part, this involved using child-friendly methods and techniques such as play, activities and creative and visual arts. These specific aspects of effective communication will be discussed further below. However, prior to this there was evidence that a capacity to enable communication to be led by the child provided the basic foundation of effective practice. By this, we mean:
• allowing children to have some control over both the process and the content of the communication
• taking time to prepare children for their participation
• providing explanations about the process that they can understand
• offering choices regarding the extent of participation, with room for some compromise and negotiation
• demonstrating a sense of fairness
• giving support and encouragement.

Interventions would then go at the child’s pace, with practitioners tailoring them to find the best way of communicating, rather than making the children adapt to the workers’ agenda. This requires time, patience, space and resources on the part of social workers and is a challenge when the social work role involves completing such formal procedures as assessments or other bureaucratic priorities in which the variety and individuality of children and their situations do not appear to have been taken into account. There was a call for flexibility in adapting systems and procedures to children, rather than the other way round. The suggestion here is that this child-centred orientation to the process of communication reinforces the emotional and ethical commitments outlined above.

It is apparent that child-centredness cannot be wholly unconditional. Confidentiality is of great importance to children, but it can create ethical dilemmas for social workers seeking to balance the wishes of children with the requirements for professional information sharing, when the children’s welfare is believed to be compromised. Whether it is children or social workers who should control information exchange remains contested.

However, the question of trust is again central here. Older children have complained about lax professional standards regarding confidentiality in the childcare system. They can be reluctant to share thoughts and feelings because of fears that these private things will be written down in their file and shared with strangers. Children in therapeutic situations stated that they needed full confidentiality in order to communicate their feelings and experiences freely. It was noted that ‘lack of confidentiality may have a real and detrimental effect on the quality and depth of the relationship’, and on the level of information that children share, particularly adolescents. Where confiden-
tiability could not be maintained, workers were advised to gain children’s informed consent to any breaches.\textsuperscript{14, 151, 152} Boundaries and limits to confidentiality needed to be clearly explained to children in a manner appropriate to the situation and their level of understanding,\textsuperscript{120, 147, 148, 153, 154} perhaps by providing written information.\textsuperscript{45}

2.2.2.6 Core condition 3: Understanding the distinctive nature of child communication

The importance of knowledge about and understanding of the distinctive ways in which children communicate is indicated in many studies. The emphasis here is on the particular characteristics, inheritance and experiences of children encountered by social workers. Eighteen papers\textsuperscript{52, 54, 55, 60, 61, 63, 67, 72, 101, 106, 117, 119, 155–160} specified that knowledge about child development norms was required to achieve this understanding.

However, exactly how these norms might best be described is contested in the literature. The accuracy,\textsuperscript{151} discriminatory nature\textsuperscript{19, 21, 23} and cultural bias\textsuperscript{75, 78, 79} of specified norms are all identified as problems. Caution is expressed that too heavy a reliance on developmental knowledge in the abstract might restrict and compartmentalise social work views of children, contradicting the child-centred principle by not allowing individuals to be seen in their own right.\textsuperscript{102, 151, 161, 162} The argument here is that practice should be informed rather than overwhelmed by ‘received’ knowledge. Social workers should supplement this with experiential learning about children (for example, from personal and professional contact with a range of children\textsuperscript{161}), learning through child observation about children’s inner as well as outer experience,\textsuperscript{102} or reading and discussing novels featuring children.\textsuperscript{162} However, none of these studies provided definitive evidence to support the case for the relative effectiveness of experiential, imaginative and theoretical approaches of these kinds.

2.2.2.7 Specific aspects of skilled communication

When considering the particular skills and techniques indicated as effective in practice, it is important, once again, to remember the contexts in which social workers engage with children. The studies reviewed varied widely in relation to the context of practice, some considering the use of
specific aspects of skill in therapeutic work, others concerned with case management and planning roles and settings. As we will see, this means that skills for practice cannot simply be taken to a relationship as if they were recipes from a cookbook or be employed directly in the absence of the core conditions discussed above. Three main aspects of skilled communication were highlighted by the review: keeping children informed, effective listening and using symbolic and expressive techniques. In each case, we found studies that provided more robust evidence than others, and these are again indicated by ‘DE’.

Skills in keeping children informed: children have both a right to and a need for information and explanations about a range of issues, such as their rights and opportunities, services available to them, their family and personal histories, and reasons for particular interventions or decisions, such as why they must move. Children value such information. One nine-year-old said approvingly of her social worker: ‘If I was confused, she would unconfuse me’ (p 134).

Providing such information is clearly a complex task, and findings from three DE studies provided evidence of social workers’ struggles. Only half of the children in one study were found to have understood the guardian’s role, despite the fact that they had been provided with information leaflets. Another study noted how information and explanations needed to be provided in age-appropriate language and repeated regularly until the child reached a clear understanding. In the third, children participating in assessments under the assessment framework observed how the process would have been improved if the social workers had explained what was going on.

Children who were asked about their experience of participation in child protection conferences advised that they needed accessible and age-appropriate information about them, preferably in the form of leaflets with pictures, cartoons and word games. Children of all ages who were represented by guardians in care proceedings wanted to be able to read all of the reports written about them and were not satisfied with having parts read to them. They did not mention being upset by the reports or finding them too long – ‘It was the right to know and not have information concealed which was important’.

Helping children be more informed about their lives was felt to be
particularly important for those who had been in care for a number of years. These children often have a sense of ‘discontinuity between past and present’ and ‘an inner feeling of holes’ through never have been told ‘some of the basic facts about their lives such as their birth date, their real name and why and when they came into care’ (126, p 21). One child’s life was likened to ‘a badly constructed jigsaw’ (53, p 34).

Official guidance specifies that specific work must be done with such children to help secure for them both an understanding of and a record about their circumstances and origins. Life story work has become a fairly widespread tool for providing such knowledge and explanations to children who do not return to their families of origin, attempting to create a tangible historical record with (rather than for) the child, with the resulting book acting as a ‘bridge from the past to the future’ (126, p 21). One DE study found that it was an important way to increase children’s understanding of their origins and experiences.

Most of these studies are anecdotal and include a number that describe ways of carrying out this work. Principles previously discussed are reiterated, such as the importance of child-centred practice, use of creative methods and attending to depth processes, and significant preparation is required to marshal the necessary information. This includes locating and finding out about significant people, events and places in the child’s life.

Children did not always retain the information in their life story books (168, p 89). This may be because the work did not sufficiently attend to children’s level of understanding and preferred ways of communicating. Two papers considered how to work with much younger children when doing this: one suggested using creative methods, while the other recommended preparing a book for the child, which could then be read to them. Videos of biological parents were also suggested as a way of providing children with an accessible record of their origins.

Written communication was used in a range of other ways, for example, in a narrative approach, and using letters written to children after a session, which not only summarised the work but demonstrated to them that they had been witnessed and understood and that their communication has been honoured.
Listening skills for direct and indirect communication: developing skills for listening to children was advised by a number of papers\textsuperscript{22, 40, 42, 109, 116, 171–174} and was among the most valued attribute of social workers in one DE study. ‘Listening’, however, was a contested concept. Whereas workers felt that they demonstrated listening simply by being there for the child, hearing them and empathising, children saw listening as an active rather than passive process, involving attuned responses,\textsuperscript{172} taking views into account\textsuperscript{174} or acting on the wishes expressed.\textsuperscript{16 DE} In other words, the emphasis was on being part of a shared experience of communication, followed by appropriate action.

This could present ethical dilemmas for social workers, especially when judgements about the veracity of what was said had to be made, when communication involved differing functions. For example, attempts to balance ‘therapeutic’, ‘judicial’ and pragmatic concerns when hearing children’s accounts of abuse were not straightforward.\textsuperscript{175–178} As a result, children could feel that they had not been properly heard.\textsuperscript{171} Children preferred explicitness by social workers about such tensions.\textsuperscript{179, 180}

Listening was seen to have tangible benefits in differing ways. For instance, for children’s guardians listening was crucial for the promotion of the child’s voice in care proceedings.\textsuperscript{39, 41, 172} In this and other settings where children had been listened to and given a measure of influence over decisions about service provision, some of the processes and outcomes of the work had been more successful.\textsuperscript{45, 91, 140, 154} Emotional and psychological gains were said to arise from children being invited to participate actively,\textsuperscript{40} having their views taken seriously\textsuperscript{24} and being trusted to make decisions, even when they sometimes made mistakes.\textsuperscript{139} These benefits caused Schofield and Brown to conclude that ‘developments in contemporary social work practice which are often framed in terms of children’s rights and empowerment can be reframed quite usefully as making excellent psychological sense’ (\textsuperscript{63, pp 27–28}).

Listening was found to be stressful both personally and emotionally for social workers.\textsuperscript{171} They needed emotional strength and capacity if they were going to be able to hear, understand and respond to children’s underlying communications.\textsuperscript{63} This acknowledged that children often conveyed their thoughts, feelings and experiences through indirect means, for example, their body language, behaviour, relational style, play and other symbolic forms of communication.\textsuperscript{20, 56, 63, 56, 73, 105, 124, 126, 171}
Numerous papers gave attention to how social workers might need to receive, understand and respond to these indirect communications in order to be useful to the child. Children’s engagement and conduct within the relationship, for example, was felt to be a potential source of information about their internal world. Observations of children’s play and use of creative arts, too, were believed to inform on children’s experience, although there is currently no viable developmental framework tested empirically that can explain precisely how children’s play reflects their life experience. None of the studies in this group sought to test these hypotheses about indirect communications and their meaning and effect.

When direct communications were necessary (for example, to find out what had occurred to a child in order to plan for their safety), certain facilitating interviewing techniques were found to be more successful. For example, open-ended prompts produced longer, more detailed and more accurate accounts than focused/closed questions, especially with younger children who might invent information if they felt pressured.

We found no empirical research on how social workers and children might communicate effectively through interpreters. Most material identified was in the form of textbook guidance or resources to be employed and so did not meet our inclusion criteria.

Skills in symbolic, creative, non-verbal and expressive techniques: children within a range of ages were found or perceived to respond better when communication was via, or alongside, play, games, activity-based work and/or use of the creative and expressive arts. Strong empirical support was reported by a review of seven studies, which found that this was true of children from diverse cultures who were at risk and/or who had been subjected to adverse experiences. These indirect modes of communication were described as ‘the language of communication with the child client’, enabling them to ‘feel comfortable and understood and to express and process their feelings’ (p 405). These communication methods were believed to assist in the opening up areas of feeling that children ‘may not be able to put into words or would deny in conversation’ (p 59) and were felt to be ‘more effective in bringing out the complexities of
their experience than methods and techniques used by/with adults’ (21, pp 54–55). Consequently they could be useful in assessment work for gaining information about the child’s world, avoiding the kinds of questions that children are often suspicious of. 21 There was not an expectation that social workers using symbolic and creative modes of communication would function at the level of art or play therapists, who use these forms as primary therapeutic tools and so are particularly trained and experienced in their use. Instead art forms should be seen as bridges to open up communication so that the child can become more effectively involved in the therapeutic process. 199

There were different views expressed about the amount of verbalisation needed alongside the symbolic or creative mode. While those writing from a non-directive play therapy approach felt that it was better to remain mainly working at the metaphorical level, 20, 73 most believed that some verbalisation was generally needed, dependent on the child’s age and ability to communicate about the topic and purpose of the work. While guidance on the use of these methods is widespread within textbooks on working directly with children, we did not find firm evidence relating to exactly what was most effective or how these methods should be taught.

The choice of medium with each child was felt to be influenced by their response to the different materials available and whether certain tools might work better with particular issues. 143 For example, engagement and trust in a child’s relationship with a social worker was seen to be enhanced by activity-based work, playing games and having fun together, 21, 111, 128 particularly with children who would otherwise have had no interest in a talking relationship. 48 To do this, workers had to be able to be playful and creative in their interactions, 128 reminding us that personal qualities as well as professional skills are foundational.

Choice of medium also seemed to relate to what practitioners had been trained to use, what they had read about and the modes of communication and expression most familiar or comfortable to them, such as music, 193, 197, 198 poetry, 190, 194 artwork, 151, 196 drama 189 and guided reading. 57, 96, 191 Self-preparation by the worker was said to be necessary as creative and symbolic work could evoke strong or unexpected reactions. 198

Such creative and expressive approaches were not only non-directive. A variety of graphic tools were proposed as a way to inform or structure engagement, assessment and intervention. 200 These were often simple,
low-tech and visual, such as rating scales that appealed to younger children, with a happy face at one end and a sad or angry one at the other. Ecomaps and genograms were advocated as effective ways of engaging collaboratively and dynamically with children and gathering information, being carried out either simply on paper, with toys or by using computer programs. Such tools can be powerful, however, and require sensitive and skilled use. Experiential learning is necessary if they are to be used safely and effectively.

Some children were said to find it easier to communicate their feelings in written form. We found very little research advocating the use of email and none on the use of mobiles or text messaging by social workers despite the exponential growth in the use of such technologies by children. Findings that younger children are more dependent on non-verbal gestural cues than older children may be relevant here, potentially meaning that online or other written communications might be less successful below a certain age. Some suggestions were made about using multimedia forms of communication, for example, helping children to participate more fully in planning by presenting the relevant issues in a more familiar and more interactive format.

Taken together, these conditions and skills for effective communication are more or less well evidenced by the research findings that have explicitly addressed the question. However, as we have shown throughout, research findings in this field are suggestive rather than conclusive, and areas of contention persist in respect of the nature and applicability of differing aspects of communication. On this basis, the findings provide an appropriate but only indicative foundation for decisions by programme providers about the focus, learning aims and outcomes of the social work curriculum. The nature of the empirical evidence also indicates that further research attention needs to be given to the topic of social work communication with children in its own right.
2.3 Research message 2: What constitutes effective teaching, learning and assessment of communication skills with children and young people in qualifying social work education?

2.3.1 Sources of evidence

In the second part of the research review, we turn to the empirical evidence about the teaching and assessment methods best indicated in the sources identified. Much less work has been done here, although it is possible to make some key distinctions in respect of what might count as effective teaching and to report the limited evidence of success in each case.

Through our systematic search of databases, supplemented by relevant citations and handsearches, we identified 52 social work education references suitable for keywording in accordance with our quality and relevance appraisal criteria. Of these references, 31 were works that reported empirical findings on social work education consistent with our definition. The other 24 were descriptive and/or conceptual papers. Of the empirical references, only six met our criteria for inclusion for in-depth data extraction and analysis. Findings of these six studies are identified as ‘DE’ and are discussed in full below.

These figures indicate that earlier statements that little is known about how social work education and training promotes skilled professional intervention, remains true. Our review found few accounts of what teaching and learning has been taking place in this aspect of the social work curriculum. Fewer still are the empirical studies designed to evaluate in a replicable way the impact and effectiveness of this teaching.

We have found examples of small but coherent bodies of literature in the UK in which the teaching and learning of communication skills with children in social work education is conceptualised and described and some evaluation of the relevance and impact of methods and experiences reported. Although our review was explicitly designed to report findings for social work education at qualifying (pre-registration) level only, where our references address the relationship between this stage of professional training and teaching and learning for continuing professional development at the post-qualifying stage, we report these findings too.

In the next section, we report on and provide a thematic analysis of
the ways in which communication with children is conceptualised in social work education and of the conceptual and descriptive accounts of the aims and methods of teaching of those skills. In doing this, we consider the extent to which the objectives of social work education in this field are informed by the research messages we have already reviewed on what counts as effective communication in social work practice. We then present empirical research findings, including those drawn from our in-depth data analysis, on the effectiveness of this teaching. The six studies that met our inclusion criteria are reviewed in the second part of the thematic analysis, their findings being contrasted with the claims made for each method of teaching in the more conceptual and anecdotal accounts. Again, these studies cannot be analysed as a coherent body of findings, focused on one or more aspect of teaching and learning, but must be read as more methodologically sound illustrations of diverse practice.

2.3.2 Thematic analysis

2.3.2.1 Conceptualising 'skilled communication' with children in social work education

Four core themes emerged in relation to the way communication as a topic is approached in research on teaching and learning.

First, teaching communication as a skill in social work with children is rarely singled out for definition and research in its own terms. This replicates the main finding about communication in social work practice itself. References to learning and teaching communication are likely to be found in papers concerned with teaching the full range of social work practice skills with children and families, in which communication as a distinctive skill can be lost from sight. Alternatively there are accounts that explore the core conditions for effective communication itself, but these do not always put communication into a practice context. The findings from our survey of social work programmes (see below) show how this split informs curriculum design.

Second, the coverage of the research literature is patchy in relation to teaching and learning skilled communication for a range of practice contexts. In particular, the implications of diversity and discrimination are unevenly examined in this literature. Isolated accounts of teach-
ing anti-oppressive communication (for example, with gay and lesbian youth) and only passing references to cultural difference (for example, in papers on child observation) were found. This absence of analysis suggests that attempts to recognise and support the differing capacity and commitment to communicate of very young children, teenagers and disabled children might not yet be widely seen in social work education, at least at qualifying level. Generally we were surprised to find a lack of differentiation in references to the impact on communication of the age and developmental status of children and of the social work context in which communication was expected. This is disappointing as our review of social work practice had also confirmed expectations that contextual factors in social work can inhibit effective communication with children.

Third, there is an almost exclusive focus on face-to-face communication. We found no published reports on the teaching and learning of written or other interactive modes of communication in social work with children, including the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). This is consistent with other findings for communication generally. A recent study undertaken by the Higher Education Academy, Social Policy and Social Work subject centre, identified ‘limited and patchy historical developments in e-learning in social work’ (p ii). However, subsequent efforts to remedy this matter appear to have focused primarily on the development of e-learning resources to support programme delivery, as well as the acquisition by students of a generic capability in the use of ICT for learning. Far less attention appears to have been given to the application of such skills to direct work with children (see www.swap.ac.uk).

This situation may now be changing. In an unpublished paper that reports an evaluation of an innovative virtual (online) social work service for children, implications for teaching and learning interactive ‘computer-mediated communication’ skills are considered. Using these findings, the authors suggest that social work educators should recognise that students need to feel comfortable with computer-mediated communication as a method. They also suggest that the medium itself necessitates the adaptation and extension of communication skills, and not simply their application. They report that these conclusions have already been reached in the field of counselling and psychotherapy.

Fourth, the distinction – made by the children we consulted at the
outset and developed in the review of social work practice – about the core conditions (‘being’) and specific aspects (‘doing’) of skilled communication is replicated in the studies on social work education. So, too, are the contrasting views of childhood and the nature of social work communication with children. However, as we will show, there is almost no evidence in the research that programme providers have considered the nature of the relationship between these contrasting learning aims and views or the implications for teaching and assessment methods. Once again, our subsequent findings from the survey of social work programmes (see below) indicate that no consistent approach is being taken to provide coherence and integration in respect of these dual perspectives on what counts as effective communication.

2.3.2.2 Learning aims and outcomes and teaching methods

The review illuminated the way in which the dual perspectives – on communication and childhood – are being incorporated into social work education. It enabled the identification of contrasting approaches to what was being taught and how. We have called these the skill acquisition and capability-building approaches to learning and teaching.

By ‘skill acquisition’, we mean approaches that aim to teach students specific skills and that utilise theories of learning that are essentially task-centred and behavioural. Here communication is seen as a ‘social skill’ \(^{214, 215}\) to be developed through practice and self-assessment and demonstrated in performance. By contrast, the ‘capability-building’ approach is concerned with the development of an underpinning capacity for, and commitment to, the emotional and ethical engagements with children said to be necessary for effective communication. In relation to the nature of this capability, a further distinction emerges. This is between a psychosocial understanding of what constitutes personal and professional capacity and an empowerment model.

We explore these contrasting perspectives in turn, reporting and commenting on their presentation in the reviewed studies. In both cases, the centrality given to experiential learning methods should be noted.

The aim of the skill acquisition approaches is to use task-centred methods to enable students to develop some measure of competence and proficiency in the acquisition and application of skills and techniques of communication. In this case, an interactive approach to experiential...
learning is reported: our search produced six papers written from this perspective, the first four reporting social work education in the US or Canada.

Pope reviews the use of role-play in video rooms and skills laboratories as contexts for learning ‘one-to-one skills’ (p 51). Saltiel reports the use of critical incidents in seminar discussions by students on a post-qualifying childcare programme. The focus here is on learning through shared reflection on the ‘real skills’ (p 108) used in practice. Both of these papers provide only anecdotal evidence of the impact of the methods reported. Mitchell argues for and reports the use of role-play and small group interaction methods, designed to develop ‘clinical practice skills’ (p 99). Collins et al are concerned that childcare workers and social workers alike may not be acquiring communication skills on their respective pre-registration programmes because of a lack of systematic learning. Both these papers present evidence from empirical findings from evaluative studies. LeCroy and Ryan outline a ‘set of competency skills’ (p 323) and advocate the use of micro-skills laboratories to provide experiential learning of basic skills. As with Collins et al, the emphasis is on the importance of skill acquisition via college-based teaching prior to the structured application in practice learning of skills learned. Hodges et al assert instead that skills are best acquired through intensive on-the-job instruction and supervision in a specific method of intervention.

Where it is mentioned at all in these task-centred approaches, student assessment focuses mainly on the demonstration through performance of the skills taught. Formative self and peer-assessment are said to be beneficial to students, and summative self-assessment of the effective transfer of skills to subsequent social work practice is also advised. Assessment in practice is itself favoured by those who want to see skills acquired and/or applied in the relevant professional setting. Case presentations are advised in one paper. However, assessment of the capacity for reflection on skills is seen as secondary to the demonstration in performance of those skills.

In contrast, the aim of the capability-building approach is to facilitate a communicative capacity in the student rather than to provide instruction and practice in the use of specific skills. The emphasis here is on the enhancement of the personal capability and commitment of the student to communicate with children through the holistic use of self. Reflection
is central in this approach too, but the primary focus here is reflection on self rather than reflection on performance in skilled behaviour. Accounts written from a psychosocial stance were concerned with the emotional and developmental underpinning of this communicative and reflective capacity, while those from a problem-based or empowerment perspective gave prominence instead to professional ethical considerations.

The search uncovered 46 references written from capacity-building perspectives. The large majority of these took a psychosocial stance, with only seven references being informed by the empowerment model. Only one of these references is an evaluative study meeting our criteria for inclusion for in-depth data extraction. We discuss each of these seven papers in due course, when we consider our findings on the recommended nature of the learning environment for communicative capacity and skill development. In the meantime, we select two accounts to serve as illustrative examples of what we mean by this distinction and the range of perspectives incorporated within it. Both references report social work education on Masters of Social Work (MSW) programmes in the US.

From a psychodynamic perspective, Shachter speaks about facilitating in students the ‘developmental capacity for involvement in a helping process in complex psychosocial problem situations’ (221, p 161). He says that students should be expected to identify and manage their emotions in stressful situations, on the assumption that this capacity for attunement and containment underpins effective social work engagement and communication with children. In contrast, taking a problem-based stance, Smith and Bush enabled students to become active participants in planning teaching and learning on a course that used reading, presentations and role-play to explore creative and expressive skills in communication. The authors claim that this method ‘was focused on technique yet provided multidimensional learning rooted in empowerment, connections to theory, and experiential feedback on professional use of self’ (142, p 198). Quoting Hegar, their assumption is that ‘children can become empowered through close associations with adults who exemplify empowerment themselves’ (142, p 379).

These contrasting approaches to teaching and learning communicative capacity, that is, the psychosocial concern with emotional attunement and containment versus the focus on personal and social empowerment, are rooted in the equally differing understandings of the nature of
childhood discussed earlier. The first sees individual developmental need and vulnerability in children and explores the impact of this on the student. The capacity of the student to manage this impact is the focus here. The second sees structural oppression and looks for personal capability and a student commitment to respect, respond to and enhance this.

In these capability-building approaches, assessment of students is undertaken in ways consistent with the respective learning philosophies. For example, Shachter\textsuperscript{221} discusses the diagnostic nature of assessment of developmental capacity in students, the selection process at the outset of the programme being seen as a crucial first step. Other social work educators using a psychosocial approach (see below) place more responsibility on students to reflect and report on their developing capacity for emotional engagement with children. In the ‘empowerment’ tradition, Smith and Bush\textsuperscript{142DE} selected assignments that enabled students to show their strengths and creativity through collective presentations.

Despite the different emphases, both of these capacity-building approaches share a common belief that the methods of teaching, learning and assessment of communicative skill should model the approach itself. Modelling emerged in the review as a key commitment of social work educators who took the view that teaching communication skills for work with children involved more than getting students to learn and practice techniques themselves. In addition, modelling was seen as important for creating an environment for capacity and skill development as well as being a strategy for individual learning. It was assumed that the development of capacity and learning of a skill by the individual student would be influenced by the learning community, or what has elsewhere been called the ‘community of practice’,\textsuperscript{222} in which that capacity or skill was facilitated.

Ward provides a simple definition of modelling, or what he calls ‘the matching principle’, in social work education.\textsuperscript{223,224} This principle states that ‘the mode of training should reflect the mode of practice’ (\textsuperscript{223, p 190}). In this case, the assumptions made about what constitutes communicative capacity in social work with children should be embodied in the way it is learned and assessed. Approaches emphasising the importance of emotional attunement and containment would be expected to provide the same conditions for students during training. Similarly, those concerned with social work facilitation of active participation and problem solving by children would need to ensure that learning and
assessment were active and inclusive. Writers in either orientation stress the influence of the social context in which skills are both practised and learned. Psychosocial authors such as Ward seek to establish emotionally containing learning environments to enable self-reflection, while ‘empowerment’ advocates (for example, Smith and Bush) aim to delegate their power to students who, by finding their ‘voice’ (p 189), can learn how to enable children to develop theirs.

The review uncovered examples of both types of modelling in social work education in the UK. We found two coherent bodies of literature informed by a psychosocial orientation to communication, along with more episodic accounts written from a participatory, social action or ‘empowerment’ perspective on social work with children.

**Modelling emotional attunement and containment:** the review identified two bodies of literature on social work education from a psychosocial perspective in which the modelling of emotional attunement and containment is the preferred approach to capability building. These are substantially derived from the experience of social work educators and students in teaching and learning childcare on the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) between 1992 and 2004. The first involves the use of child observation and the second concerns communication with children in residential and day care settings.

Consistent with the guidance provided by Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), the training council then responsible for social work education, infant and child observation training was revitalised in social work education in the early 1990s. The link was made here between knowledge of human growth and development, observational skills and effective social work communication with children. Between 1989 and 1997, 103 social work tutors and practice teachers associated with at least 13 different social work programmes undertook a course in child observation. Commissioned from the Tavistock Clinic in London, this was specifically tailored to the needs of social work educators and practice teachers. Annual study days were held where experiences of introducing and teaching observation were shared, and in 1997, a training manual and video designed to support the dissemination of the model was produced.

Establishing an observational stance as a means of gaining access to
the emotional experience of a child is the primary aim of infant and child observation. This focus on the internal world of children, central to the psychoanalytic tradition was widened in social work education to include the diverse external contexts in which young children’s experiences and relationships were formed. Family and other attachments and relationships, cultural diversity in child rearing, differing care-taking contexts including substitute care and day care and the effects of discrimination by ‘race, gender and class’ were all specifically included as aspects of proper observational interest for student social workers.

In this way, observation was seen as a skill for acquiring knowledge about the overall experience of young children. From a developmental perspective, students would learn about the presentation and behaviour of children in their diverse social worlds, which would underpin reading in human growth and development. From a psychosocial stance, it would teach students how to become attuned to the internal world of the child and its relationship to external circumstances and, crucially, to cope with the feelings and thoughts evoked in the observer. This would be the foundation for subsequent social work communication in practice, in which either identification with, or dismissal of, painful child experience would be avoided and an effective relationship formed. This approach is consistent with the research findings from social work practice that show the importance of ‘below the surface’ communications.

Experiential learning gained through contact with children is consolidated during the regular child observation seminar. Here students take turns in reading reports of their observations and reflect on the experience of establishing and maintaining an observant stance and on the learning gained as a result. The observation seminar is led by the tutor in such a way as to ensure it provides a challenging yet containing environment in which the emotional communication between child and student is recognised and reflected on. In this way, the teaching method is intended to model the emotionally engaged reflective practice expected of social workers in their communication with children (and of agency supervisors).

Student assessment is through a written report and reflection on the observation and the differing aspects of learning derived from it, following the formative processes enabled in the seminar. The measures used are: demonstration of the capacity for engagement with a child and their situation, the quality of the observation data reported and
demonstration of a capability for self-reflection on the skills used and impact of observation.

At much the same time as observation was being reintroduced in social work, education concerns with the quality of personal relationships between workers and children in residential care surfaced in the 1991 Utting review\textsuperscript{243} and the ‘Pindown’ enquiry of 1990,\textsuperscript{244} both of which exposed abusive practices. A residential childcare initiative (RCCI) was launched, designed to boost professional training in social work for residential workers.\textsuperscript{223, 224, 245–248} In total, 476 staff undertook the programme across the nine sites between 1992 and 1997.\textsuperscript{249} In Scotland, a similar scheme was introduced in October 2001, with two universities developing ‘particular pathways’ in residential childcare.\textsuperscript{247}

The RCCI involved students in learning all aspects of social work practice in residential settings with children, and this is reflected in the accounts that have emerged from the experience of developing this aspect of the DipSW curriculum. However, a central concern has been with the distinctive nature of social work communication with children in group care settings. Karban suggests the RCCI reminded social work educators that the fieldwork focus on ‘individual casework/therapy skills’ neglects the learning that can arise from what he calls ‘working alongside young people on a day-to-day basis’ (\textsuperscript{249}, p 248).

This insight has been developed by Ward\textsuperscript{245} into a conceptual model of therapeutic communication with young people. Ward proposes that attention should be given to the therapeutic opportunities available to social workers in the ‘everyday’ contexts provided by residential and day care settings. This approach is presented as complementary to the conventional focus on therapeutic communications in clinical\textsuperscript{250} and fieldwork settings.\textsuperscript{251}

Ward introduces the idea of ‘opportunity-led work’,\textsuperscript{223} where therapeutic relationships are shown to arise from ‘extensive everyday involvement between staff and clients’ (\textsuperscript{223}, p 178). He works this idea up into a ‘theory of the everyday’ for residential work, which is based on the notion of ‘special everyday living’.\textsuperscript{245} This involves five aspects of therapeutic care. A core assumption is that ‘supportive communication’ (\textsuperscript{245}, p 222) with children is based in relationships and an environment that contains and remodels angry and avoidant responses. Having identified what is needed for effective practice, the aim is to ‘address the gap between training and
practice, by importing *some elements* of the process of practice into the process of training* (224, p 190).

The idea of the ‘holding environment’ is used to suggest how the unconscious as well as the conscious aspects of learning can be addressed and for ‘the reflection process to operate’ (224, p 193). Ward describes how a holding environment was introduced on a post-qualifying Masters in Therapeutic Child Care. Three ‘components of practice’ were recreated on the programme: ‘the community meeting, the use of experiential group work and the use of staff meetings for the holding of the staff team’ (224, p 193). The seminar format developed by Danbury and Wallbridge to facilitate reflection on the content and process of learning is also used. McMahon says that ‘the progression of the course ... is designed to reflect both the stages of a child’s emotional development and the related process of therapeutic work’ (246, p 202). Winnicott’s idea of maturational processes and Docker-Drysdale’s application of this approach to residential therapeutic work are central influences and cited here. McMahon explains how the ‘process of the work, from primary experience to symbolisation and conceptualisation, as the child struggles towards some degree of integration, is matched in the course structure’ (246, p 214).

We found three additional papers that supported the idea of using an emotionally facilitating environment in social work practice and education in group care.

The formative nature of student self- and peer assessment is emphasised in these reports, but it is not made clear what summative modes are used to consolidate the experiential learning from the ‘everyday’ therapeutic communication promoted.

In addition to psychosocial accounts of learning communication through observation and daily living, we identified a small number of papers describing methods designed to facilitate the enhancement of the purposeful use of self in practice in general. Again the assumption here is that students will only be able to get in touch with the experiences and motivations of children, and thereby communicate effectively with them, by first exploring their own experiences and motivations in a safe environment.

Davis describes a group supervision model to help students’ understanding of communication at a therapeutic as well as just a factual and procedural level in child protection practice. Davis reports that the enhanced communication of empathy by students enabled family
members to tell their stories more readily. Gleeson\textsuperscript{257} used survey findings to argue that student life experiences should be incorporated into self-directed learning approaches at qualifying level. Once again, supervision – on this occasion, in practice settings – provides the context for this learning. Cooper\textsuperscript{258} taking a constructivist approach, reaches a similar conclusion. He sees ‘use of self’ as a ‘moral commitment’ (\textsuperscript{258}, p 118), asserting that the process of establishing professional identity should be seen as a ‘learning and development partnership’ (\textsuperscript{258}, p 116) between student, assessor and tutor. This mirrors partnerships in practice. Clapton\textsuperscript{259} reports that practice teachers, including himself, had found that the best strategy in practice learning was co-working between student and practice teacher, which provided an ‘increased depth of experiential learning’ (\textsuperscript{259}, p 31) and self-reflection. Troester\textsuperscript{260} requires pairs of students on placement to co-facilitate groups of latency-age children, with supervision providing reflective space for consolidating this kind of experiential learning.

Finally, Applegate\textsuperscript{261} has reviewed new findings from psychoanalytically informed research on infant development and neuroscience, which suggest the renewed focus on ‘relationship-based’ practice exemplified here has empirical support. He asserts that students themselves ‘welcome a theory that helps them understand, in depth, what makes people tick’ (\textsuperscript{261}, p 34) including themselves, because they are ‘discouraged by what they see in their managerially focused field agencies’ (\textsuperscript{261}, p 34).

**Modelling participation as a method for communication in social work education:** by contrast to those written from a psychosocial orientation, the review identified far fewer accounts of the use of modelling informed by commitment to active participation and problem-solving by children. This ‘empowerment’ model\textsuperscript{12} is familiar in social work. In this case, it requires students to consider actively the experience of children as marginal or excluded participants in social work communications concerned with decisions and resources.

The references we found suggested that two methods are used to enable students to understand, empathise and engage actively with this experience as a basis for effective communication. The first involves extending conventional experiential teaching methods such as role-play. The second is more direct, bringing students in college-based learning face to face with children themselves.
Three references were concerned with innovative experiential teaching and learning methods. West and Watson\textsuperscript{262} report the use of sculpts on a DipSW ‘particular pathway’ course on working with children, families and carers. Sculpting a review meeting enabled students to put themselves in the position of children and other family members and to realise how power structures and dynamics could inhibit communication for participation. The students in the Smith and Bush\textsuperscript{142 DE} account learned how children might make use of creative and expressive methods of communication by trying them out themselves as ‘children’, being guided in the process by other students. Ross and Wright\textsuperscript{263} gave ‘significant voice and responsibility’ to their students by piloting ‘participant-created case studies’ (263, p 79) and suggesting that clients be represented realistically in role-plays.

These simulations of the modelling of communication as participation make some commentators uneasy. Now they are positioned as social actors rather than vulnerable or disordered clients, the logic is to involve children directly in the teaching and learning process in social work education. For example, Boehm and Staples advise social work educators to prepare students ‘to listen more attentively to the voices of consumers’ (140, p 458).

We identified three papers reporting this approach. Mallon\textsuperscript{85} describes the involvement of LGB young people in a workshop designed to enhance the knowledge and awareness of social workers and foster carers and help these adults practise more sensitive language and communication. He emphasises the collaborative nature of the learning that takes place from joint viewing and discussion of video scenarios of empowering and disempowering communications. Similarly, Boylan et al\textsuperscript{264} tell about two presentations by young people to DipSW students in which student awareness of the strengths that young people demonstrate in difficult situations was a secondary aim to that of enabling the young people involved to learn the skills of self-advocacy. Howes\textsuperscript{166} reports a practitioner research project in which a focus group was used to consult children about the policy and practice of child protection conferences. She advises the use of this approach in social work education.

Modelling of participation by involving children in college-based teaching or through project work in agencies conveys an ethical message about their status as ‘service users’ and the changing assumptions of where power and expertise should lie in social work communications.
It also seeks to add greater realism to more conventional experiential learning such as role-play or the use of actors. In this way, it is said, a bridge can be established between ‘live’ practice experience in the field and college-based simulations.

Our search identified no references in which the implications for assessment of the proposed direct involvement of children in teaching social work students were discussed.

2.3.2.3 Impact and effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment of communication skills with children

Several authors\(^6, 8, 265\) have already reported the paucity of robust, independent evaluation of the effectiveness of social work education. We can confirm the same finding for each aspect of learning, teaching and assessment of communication skills with children reviewed above. We found only six evaluative studies that met our inclusion criteria for in-depth data extraction: Collins et al,\(^217\) Mitchell,\(^51\) Gleeson,\(^257\) Scannapieco et al,\(^266\) Smith and Bush\(^142\) and Trowell\(^220\) (all DE). The first five report findings from practice in the US.

In reviewing these studies, we were interested in the extent to which they provided evidence to support the claims made in the conceptual, descriptive and anecdotal references written from skills acquisition and capability-building perspectives on communication skill and its development. In the following sections, we report and review the findings from our in-depth analysis of these studies.

Evidence to support the skills acquisition approach: Collins et al,\(^217\) DE Mitchell,\(^51\) DE Gleeson\(^257\) DE and Scannapieco et al\(^266\) DE each consider the impact of skills training undertaken on qualifying social work programmes and/or in-service training in the US or Canada.

The main findings from this group of studies were:

- Systematic skills training can have a significant impact on the development in students of accurate empathy, warmth and genuineness\(^217\) DE as assessed by pre and post-written tests.
- Transferring this learning from the classroom to the workplace through the use of student-designed action plans is not particularly
effective, suggesting that follow-up supervision in the agency is necessary.\textsuperscript{51 DE}

- Incorporating a focus on life experience and self-directed learning within the context of supervision on the job is most highly rated by practitioners when compared with formal degree education, professional continuing education and agency-sponsored in-service training.\textsuperscript{257 DE} Formal skills acquisition may need to be reinforced by a specific focus on personal and professional experience in training and supervision to enable learning to be grounded in practice.

- Formal degree education can reinforce skills acquisition in communication for students seconded from agencies, although to a lesser extent than it reinforces ethical commitment, critical thinking and general practice skills.\textsuperscript{266 DE}

These studies therefore provide only partial and incomplete evidence of the impact of learning and teaching on the acquisition and transfer to practice by social workers of communication skills with children.

Methodologically the studies have flaws. Three\textsuperscript{51, 257, 266 (all DE)} rely on student and supervisor self-report of impact and application of skills taught. Only one\textsuperscript{217 DE} employs a quasi-experimental method with some element of randomisation. This study is weakened by the use of written tests of knowledge rather than measurement of skill in practice. None seeks the views of children or parents and carers who are receiving the service. Furthermore, the focus on communication as a skill in itself is uneven. In the first two papers, the focus is precise but narrow, which raises questions about the transfer of core generic skills acquired in the classroom to specific practice contexts. In the second two, it is marginal, those skills becoming obscured by wider practice issues. The contexts of practice in these papers, and the purposes for which communication skills are employed, are also quite disparate. This makes any systematic, comparative and thematic analysis very difficult.

In terms of relevance and utility, these US and Canadian studies do have a resonance for the UK audience. In particular, the evidence, patchy and limited as it is, does suggest that a simple task-centred acquisition and transmission model of skills training might be expected to have a modest impact on subsequent practice. Better results appear to be achieved where formal social work education maintains a focus on capability building and learning of core communicative capacities,
both ethical and emotional, and not simply on skills training. However, although it is suggested that supervised practice experience is the best context for the consolidation of skilled communication, these references provide no direct evidence to show how this actually happens.

Meanwhile anecdotal evidence from the non-replicable empirical studies that report and promote a task-centred training approach supports the view that the application of methods and skills needs to be approached critically. Critical reflection on the process of using skills flexibly in practice, on the rationale and principles behind practice techniques and through taking a ‘bird’s eye view’ of the interpersonal dynamic are all indicated by student feedback. Experiential learning from reflecting on practice experience with children, incorporating theory and feedback from supervisors and tutors is often recommended.

**Evidence to support the capability-building approach:** the only other evaluative studies that met our criteria for in-depth data extraction explicitly sought to test the assumption that developing personal capability is effective in promoting skilled communication with children. In the first case, empirical evidence is presented to support experiential accounts of the benefits to learning of child observation. In the second, the much more limited evidence of the effectiveness of problem-solving, empowerment-based approaches is reported.

Several authors argue for the importance of reflection on the self in general, as well as on the performance of skill in particular situations, so that emotional awareness and capacity could also be increased. There are numerous conceptual and descriptive accounts by the following: Tavistock Centre seminar leaders who trained social work tutors and practice teachers in preparation for the reintroduction of observation in social work programmes; social work tutors and practice teachers and managers, some of whom had undertaken the Tavistock course; and others involved in undertaking and providing this training.

Briggs (p 148) has suggested that ‘a complete cycle is in operation; students learn observation in training and then this is applied to post-training professional practice’. Indeed, a number of reports have now been published describing the transfer of learning from observation to various practice roles and settings. These include palliative care.
therapeutic work with children, child protection generally, child neglect, assessment and court work and the supervision of contact.

In the US, there have been reports of its use in preparing social workers and others for practice in interprofessional mental health settings.

However, evidence about the impact of this transferred learning in social work (as in psychotherapy; see still remains partial. This is a richly illustrative literature, but the only replicable empirical account we have traced is the paper by Trowell, and this focuses on the impact of observation on learning rather than on the transfer of that learning to practice. The data for this study was taken from questionnaires retrospectively completed by social work tutors and practice teachers who had undertaken the Tavistock Centre course. Learning and teaching involved the observation of a child on a weekly basis over the course of one year and parallel weekly attendance at a small group seminar. Additional study days were built into the programme.

The main findings were as follows:

- **Personal development** was enhanced, especially the recognition of the need to test beliefs and assumptions against the evidence of what is actually observed and to develop the capacity to reflect on the impact of personal experience on judgements made.

- **Professional knowledge** about child development and behaviour in the context of parenting and other forms of care was improved. So, too, was **professional skill**, especially establishing and maintaining an observant stance and developing a greater ability to focus on the emotional inner world of the child. This left students feeling more able to communicate with children and to understand their views of the world and their feelings.

- **Strong responses were reported in relation to learning about difference, stereotyping and culture.** Differences of ‘race’, gender and culture and the way they affected the experiences of children and influenced what is observed and understood were illuminated.

Trowell concludes by suggesting that observation contributes to the reflective process necessary in professional work as ‘trainees can begin to have an internal observer in their mind with whom they, in turn, can have a dialogue’ (p 110).

Once again there are methodological limitations with this study. No
comparison group was employed and the evidence of impact is wholly experiential, with participants using self-reporting. Nonetheless the emphasis on observation as a method of ‘multi-faceted learning’ is also found in the anecdotal reports raised by our search, in which the skill of maintaining an observant stance, which facilitates engagement with the feelings invoked in communication with children while enabling sufficient detachment for reflection, is emphasised. Most writers celebrate the fact that observation illuminates the importance of the relationship between the child and the social worker as a crucial context for effective communication. For some, the experience had had a more profound impact. One practitioner said it gave her ‘a sense that there was an intellectual community to whom I could align myself, even if the particular context within which I worked was not particularly sympathetic to such ideas currently’.

Those practitioners who have transferred their learning from observation into practice also report benefits in respect of communication with children. The emphasis on ‘being, more than doing’ as well as on a deeper level of communication is often highlighted in these accounts. These tutors and practitioners also emphasise the cumulative nature of learning, as students find their way into the observer role and reflect in increasing depth on their own development. They advise at least five observations to get into the role and at least eight to begin to maximise learning opportunities. The weekly seminar and the reflective papers written at or towards the end of the observations are seen as a central part of the process of integrating learning.

Miles lists a number of challenges reported to her by social work tutors who had introduced this method:

• lack of academic sympathy with observation as an approach to teaching and learning (the nature of this opposition is not described)
• difficulty in finding and keeping a space for this teaching and learning in an increasing and changing curriculum, particularly in a context of time pressures, resource shortages and student numbers
• uncertainty about where best to place observation in the programme even when commitment and resources were won.
We could find only one published account of the impact of the introduction of the social work degree in 2003 on the use of child observation, reporting the decision on their programme to move observation from the first to the second year. However, our practice survey provides a much fuller picture, to which we will return later.

In comparison with child observation, there are far fewer reports of the impact of experiential learning in daily living as a teaching method for communication in residential care or of use of self approaches more generally. Ward himself provides no evidence of the effectiveness of his ‘opportunity-led work’. McMahon is only able to offer extracts from students’ reflective work to demonstrate that the learning has been transferred into practice. Davis reports initial student resistance to the introduction of therapeutic understanding into the social work role in child protection, despite frustration with the limitations of case management, coordination and monitoring. By modelling empathy with students, trust was apparently established, and this approach could then be transferred to work with parents and children. However, no student reports of this process are provided to test these assertions.

Finally, we know very little about the impact of problem-solving and empowerment-based approaches to learning communication skills with children.

The paper by Smith and Bush was included for in-depth data extraction because, like the report by Trowell, it provides systematic feedback from a student evaluation of learning. In accordance with problem-based methods, students developed presentations using creative and expressive techniques for communication with children.

The main findings were as follows:

• students were overwhelmingly positive about the method and what they had learned
• no evidence was sought on the impact of that learning on subsequent practice.

This very positive account of student response is not wholly consistent with others on self-directed learning, whether therapeutic or problem solving in focus, where student resistance has been reported.
2.3.2.4 In summary

On the evidence of our review of studies, it is apparent that no consistent view has been developed in social work education about what counts as appropriate learning aims and teaching methods. In some cases, it is the therapeutic nature of communication itself that is promoted, whether through task-centred training of students in counselling skills or capability building through observation. In other cases, communication is seen as a process for enabling the active participation of children, and problem-based or ‘empowerment’ approaches are recommended. Although the evidence comes largely from self-reporting rather than independent evaluative measures, the findings suggest that the acquisition of a reflective communicative capacity in students provides a necessary underpinning for any performance of specific skills. Arguably both these aspects need to be developed in initial college-based settings and then consolidated and reinforced through agency-based practice experience and supervision.

In the next section of the review, we examine the ways in which social work programmes are currently defining aims and methods in this aspect of the curriculum.
3.1 Aims and objectives

The primary aim of the practice survey was to review and map current practice and emerging arrangements for the teaching, learning and assessment of communication skills with children. The survey covered qualifying award programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and where possible, we sought to highlight examples of good practice. Our enquiry took place in the spring and early summer 2005, two academic years on from the introduction of the social work degree in England in 2003, and one year in the case of Wales and Northern Ireland. A secondary aim was to underpin these findings on social work education by reporting evidence of the use and effectiveness of communication with children in social work practice.

The focus of the main survey was twofold:

- **Curriculum design**: this includes the location, integration and development in the curriculum of the teaching of communication with children as well as the links made between college-based and practice learning.
- **Teaching and assessment methods**: this includes learning aims and objectives, aspects of skills taught and assessed as well as the methods used.

The objective was to present key messages for programme providers and others so that decisions about curriculum design and teaching methods could be better informed.

3.2 Challenge of programme development

The challenge for programme providers in enabling effective learning of communication skills with children is significant. In particular, decisions have to be taken about:
• how best to incorporate specific learning and assessment of skilled communication with children within a curriculum that emphasises generic outcomes
• what range and level of skills ought to be learned for effective practice.

Teaching, learning and assessing ‘Communication skills with children, adults and those with particular communication needs’ (emphasis added)\(^1\)\(^,\)\(^4\) has been identified as one of the five 'key areas' that must be included in the social work curriculum. In addition, programme providers in England are required\(^1\) to ensure that students have experience in *at least* two practice settings and of providing services to *at least* two user groups. ‘Childcare’ and ‘mental health’ are given as examples of ‘user groups’. Communication skills are also a fundamental requirement in social work qualifying education in Wales (www.ccwales.org.uk) and Northern Ireland (www.niscc.info).

However, although direct practice with children is singled out for attention in these ways, the qualifying award was designed primarily to provide a generalist education and training. Both the academic and professional standards for degree level study\(^276\) and the practice standards\(^277\) are framed in generic terms. Neither refer to children, who are simply lost from sight as a distinctive group. Instead the emphasis in both cases is on the common expectations of what a student social worker must know, understand and be able to do to be awarded the degree in social work and enter employment. This means, for example, that students are not actually obliged to undertake direct practice with children as a particular group in order to qualify. It leaves much discretion to programme providers to decide the extent to which specific communication skills with children should be taught and assessed and how they ought to be learned.

Nonetheless, developments in children’s services\(^3\) are putting increased pressure on programme providers to show how they are teaching and assessing the distinctive communication skills needed in work with children within a generalist curriculum. It is now apparent that specialism cannot simply be put back to the post-qualifying stage.\(^278\) In England the General Social Care Council (GSCC) now claims both that the generic degree ‘prepares social workers for practice across the range of social work services, including working with children and families’ and
that ‘most students become increasingly specialist in areas in which they undertake supervised practice’ (279, p 5). Exactly how these twin objectives are achieved in practice was one of the main questions for our survey.

The range and level of these distinctive and specialist skills in communication with children also need consideration. The generic focus of the social work award has meant that programme providers have had no guidance either on what might count as a basic level of skill in work with children or on which particular skills might be included. For example, should we expect all students on the qualifying award to learn how to undertake ‘life story work’ as a means of communication, or only those who take up practice learning opportunities in a children’s services setting? Or is this an advanced specialist skill best reserved for the post-qualifying stage? The research review has already confirmed the lack of empirical evidence to inform decisions about what range of skills ought to be taught and how. Social work education policy is silent on the question of which skills belong to what level of education and training. The introduction by the Department for Education and Skills of a ‘common core’ of skills and knowledge, including effective communication, for all members of the ‘children’s workforce’, including social workers, might well remedy this situation.

In the meantime, the present survey provides evidence on how these challenges have been tackled in the introductory phase of the new award.

3.3 Survey design

The primary survey was designed to gather sufficient data for representative findings to be presented about the arrangements made by HEIs for the teaching, learning and assessment of communication skills with children on both undergraduate and postgraduate social work programmes. We sought to provide descriptive information, with illustrations, about curriculum design and teaching and assessment methods. It was not possible to gather data on the reported impact of teaching and learning in practice subsequent to qualification and registration as the first cohorts were still studying on programmes during the period of our survey. However, we were mindful of the findings of related research reviews showing the lack of robust evaluation of outcomes in social work
education. Our own research review confirms this picture in relation to skilled communication with children.

3.4 Sampling and data collection

3.4.1 Social work education survey

In the primary survey, the whole population of approved HEIs provided the sampling frame. The final sample of programmes from which data was collected and analysed was opportunistic, depending on the availability of appropriate programme staff for a telephone interview and a subsequent site visit.

Four sources of data were used:

- general programme information from websites: GSCC (www.gsc.org.uk), Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS, www.ucas.ac.uk) and individual HEI sites
- programme handbooks, module outlines and related documentation
- questionnaire responses collected in a semi-structured telephone interview
- notes of discussions held at site visits to HEIs.

Websites were used to identify the number, academic level (BA or Masters) and location (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) of social work degree programmes. It was not possible to gather further information on programmes systematically, even from HEI sites themselves because of the variable nature of the information posted.

Programme handbooks, available to the team as a result of a prior survey undertaken at the University of Sussex and on further request from HEIs, provided fuller information than websites. However, it was apparent from an initial review of these that systematic data collection would still be difficult to achieve. For example, the handbooks were a very poor source of categorical information, even about the location of teaching on communication skills with children within each programme.

The telephone interviews provided much richer data. Our initial impression was that the teaching of communication skills with children appeared to be dispersed across the curriculum, suggesting no common
frame of reference for defining the topic. In these circumstances, the
design and administration of a pre-coded questionnaire did not seem
the best approach to gathering reliable data. Instead data was collected
using information acquired from the GSCC website and via further
detective work when that information was incomplete. This data was
entered on a semi-structured questionnaire (see Appendix 4) and then
emailed out to HEIs.

Prospective respondents were offered the opportunity to complete the
questionnaire by telephone partly for these methodological reasons and
partly because of a recognition that programme providers were already
feeling the burden of requests for quality assurance or survey information
in documentary form from the GSCC and SCIE. The poor immediate
response rate following the mailing of the questionnaire confirmed this
fear. The questionnaire was piloted with two programme providers and
subsequently amended.

The telephone interviews enabled us to collect information about
differing perspectives by programme providers on their approach to de-
fining and delivering this aspect of the curriculum. This also allowed us
to return, subsequently, to the handbooks to confirm initial impressions
and recode and analyse the documentary data on aspects of programme
structure and coherence. Further programme and module documenta-
tion could also be obtained through personal contacts with providers.

Finally, site visits to HEIs enabled us to discuss in some depth – with
respondents who had given particular attention to this aspect of the
curriculum – the opportunities and constraints faced in delivering this
teaching. Students were also invited to join these discussions.

3.4.2 Allied professionals survey

In the secondary survey, a comprehensive list was identified of 22 profes-
sional bodies for ‘allied professionals’ – that is, professions other than
social work in which skills in communicating with children are of par-
ticular relevance. This list (see Appendix 5) was developed within the
research team and extended in consultation with the advisory group.

Contact details for each profession were identified from previous
knowledge and from web searching, and initial contact was made by
telephone to each central office. Each organisation was requested to
provide contact details of the person holding the training lead role for
the profession. Where organisations could identify a training lead role, a subsequent call was then made to that individual inviting them to take part in a structured interview or to complete an email questionnaire (see Appendix 6). Where specific reference was made to a potentially innovative pre-qualification training provider, further contact was initiated with the teaching establishment.

The advisory group and a number of professional bodies recommended specific specialist contacts, which were followed up in a round of further telephone calls. Further information was gathered from the following sources:

- the NHS *Communication skills (children) scoping report 2005*, which reviewed training in communicating with children available to doctors and nurses
- websites of professional bodies and individual education providers identified by professional bodies.

### 3.5 Data analysis

In the primary survey, the *quantitative data*, taken from websites, handbooks and completed telephone questionnaires, has been coded and analysed using Microsoft Excel. The aim of this analysis is modest. It is to demonstrate the representativeness of our sample and findings and to employ simple measures to show relevant patterns of curriculum design and teaching method. We have not attempted any statistical analysis of relationships between variables – for example, level of programme and existence of discrete modules on communication skills with children. Instead we have used our simple descriptive data to help us shape and focus the analysis of our qualitative findings.

Our *qualitative analysis* is organised around the two main aspects of programme provision identified above:

- *curriculum design*, including the location, integration and development in the curriculum of the teaching of communication with children, as well as the links made between college-based and practice learning
• teaching and assessment methods, which include learning aims and objectives, aspects of skills taught and assessed as well as the methods used.

Within these topic areas, categories and themes were developed as they emerged from the interview responses recorded on the questionnaires and in the site visit discussions. These, in turn, were considered in the light of our developing understanding, from the parallel research review, of what might count as relevant and effective learning for skilled communication with children.

In the case of the secondary survey, a simple narrative account of findings is presented.

3.6 Results and representativeness of sample

3.6.1 Survey of social work programmes

At the time of our survey (early summer 2005), according to the GSSC website, 73 HEIs had been approved to provide social work education and training in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Between them, they offered 63 undergraduate and 31 postgraduate programmes.

Figure 1
Approved HEIs and social work programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
From the information available to us, it was apparent that the primary mode of provision was ‘college-based’. However, a significant number of ‘employment-based’ routes to qualification are now offered by HEIs, especially at undergraduate level. The survey found no particular difference in respect of curriculum design or teaching methods between these two modes.

The data for the practice survey was taken from two sources. One was a sample of 38 programme handbooks received from 29 HEIs. The other was from telephone interviews with respondents in 32 HEIs. These latter are responsible for providing 45 programmes, of which we have information for 43.

These figures show we had handbook data for 41 per cent of undergraduate and 39 per cent of postgraduate programmes offered by HEIs. We had questionnaire data for 44 per cent of undergraduate and 48 per cent of postgraduate programmes. This suggests our opportunistic sampling is likely to have provided representative data in respect of the academic levels of programmes and routes to qualification. However, we were not successful in gathering interview data from Northern Ireland.

**Figure 2**
Representativeness of survey: undergraduate/postgraduate
In Figure 3, we show the type of programmes offered in the 32 HEIs for which we have questionnaire data.

We arranged five site visits, speaking with 13 programme staff, six students and one practice assessor about aspects of learning and teaching communication skills with children on six of these programmes.

3.6.2 Survey of allied professions

Table 1 shows the level of contact achieved across the 22 professional bodies identified.

The survey was also informed by direct contact with nine individual education providers identified as innovative in their training provision through the secondary survey. Data derived from the NHS scoping report \(^{281}\) also informed the survey.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional bodies contacted</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of professional bodies contacted</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number able to identify training lead</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews/questionnaires received from training lead</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview/questionnaires completed through other non-specialist contact in professional organisation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of professional bodies unable to identify training lead or provide other source of information</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.7 Findings 1: Survey of social work programmes

There are four main findings from the survey of current practice on social work programmes that can be highlighted at the outset:

- There is a dispersal of responsibility for developing this aspect of the curriculum on social work programmes. The interviews were conducted by two researchers. The process of identifying respondents was itself illuminating. Not all programme convenors felt well enough informed about the details of what was taught on specific modules to answer the survey questions. Often researchers were referred on to other colleagues in the search for the person who might be best placed to know what was being done in this area of the curriculum. This experience reflected the impression generated by the handbook-mapping exercise – that the teaching of communication skills with children itself is dispersed and that it is not always easy to see where it might appear within the programme.

- No coherent or effective model of curriculum design has yet emerged in response to the challenge of teaching specific communication skills with children within a generic curriculum. Learning skilled communication with children has yet to be identified as a topic area deserving of teaching and assessment in its own right on social work programmes. This marks it out in comparison with other curriculum requirements such as knowledge of the law, where it is normal for the subject to be taught in discrete modules. Nor is this specific aspect of communication given significant or consistent attention alongside communication with adults. Instead, teaching and learning is embedded in generic communication skills or applied practice skills modules. There is no guarantee on any programme that students will be taught, still less assessed, in communication with children, even where they undertake practice learning in children’s services settings.

- The learning outcomes and methods of teaching of communication skills with children remain uncertain or contested and distinctive approaches to learning and assessment have yet to be consolidated. It is difficult to begin the process of mapping different approaches to learning, teaching and assessment in this area because of uncertainty on social work programmes about what is intended to be achieved in relation
to teaching communication skills. The limited and partial nature of developments confirm the evidence of the research review, that this aspect of the curriculum has yet to attract the consistent and focused attention of programme providers.

- *Children themselves are beginning to become actively involved* in module design, teaching and assessment, but there are contrasting views about how best this involvement ought to be focused.

We report in more detail on each of these three latter findings in this section before outlining the results of the secondary survey into allied professions.

### 3.7.1 Curriculum design

Unlike the introduction of the DipSW in 1992, there was no specific guidance given to programme providers of the new social work award about the detail of curriculum content in relation to practice with children. The research review demonstrated the extent to which the explicit focus on communication with children in that earlier guidance, supported by training resources for tutors and practice teachers, had made an impact on practice on programmes in certain areas such as child observation. The current survey sought to identify how far and in what ways programmes themselves had attempted to bring communication with children actively into view in a situation where they had been lost from sight in both the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for social work and the benchmark statement for social work.

Using reported information on 117 relevant modules from the 43 programmes surveyed we found that, in the large majority of cases, the learning of communication skills with children is embedded either in modules on generic communication skills or in those on applied social work practice.

As Figure 4 (below) shows, discrete modules for learning communication skills with children are extremely rare. In only one case did a respondent identify a module explicitly focused on skills in working with children. This had been developed for the DipSW and it was not clear whether it would be offered in the same form on the new award. Instead, any learning of specific communication skills with children takes place...
either in generic communication skills courses or in those with a wider focus on social work practice as a whole.

By ‘generic communication skills’ we mean those modules with titles related more to some of the underpinning skills for social work set out in the benchmark statement. These included titles such as ‘Communication skills’, ‘Skills development’, ‘Skills for competent practice’, ‘Interviewing skills’ and the like. By ‘social work practice’ we mean modules with titles consistent with the occupational focus of the NOS for social work (especially key roles 1–4) on ‘working with’ people to assess, plan, carry out, review and evaluate. In the majority of these cases, teaching took place in modules specifically to do with practice with children. Titles here included ‘Working with children and families’, ‘Social work practice with children and families’ and ‘Working with looked-after children’, ‘Safeguarding children’ and so on. In other cases, communication with children was taught in generic practice modules with titles such as ‘Social work processes and practice’, ‘Theories and methods of social work’ and ‘Social work practice’.

**Figure 4**
Type of module in which communication skills with children are embedded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Module</th>
<th>Number of Modules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS/CYP</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWP</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWP/CYP</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HGD</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key:
CS: generic communication skills
CS/CYP: communication skills with children and young people
SWP: generic social work practice
SWP/CYP: social work practice with children and young people
HGD: human growth and development
In a few cases, respondents reported that teaching took place in human growth and development and other modules. The ‘Other’ category included modules entitled ‘Psychology and sociology for social work practice’, ‘Challenging behaviour’, ‘Society, organisation and people’ and ‘Advocacy, rights and representation’. Significant here is the fact that it was in ‘Human development’ and ‘Other’ modules that learning about communication from child observation was most likely to be included in the curriculum. We will discuss the role of child observation more fully in due course.

This distribution of teaching – roughly equal between communication skills and social work practice modules – demonstrates how programmes consider direct engagement with children to be either a core or applied skill or both. In ‘Interviewing skills’ modules, interviewing children would typically be given a focus, either through setting aside a session for that purpose or through role-play or another exercise involving a child or young person. In modules where aspects of social work practice were learned, skills were related to specific social work roles. For example, it was common for respondents to refer to teaching on the assessment framework or to care planning for ‘looked-after children’ when asked when communication skills with children were addressed.

The general tendency is for core communication skills with children (and child observation) to be taught in the first year of the programme and applied specialist practice skills in the final year.

Many programme providers are tackling the challenge of embedding specific communication skills teaching for practice with children within a generic curriculum by teaching core skills early in the programme and applied skills later on. Figures 5 and 6 (below) show that the dominant mode of curriculum design is for this teaching to take place in core communication skills modules in the first year of programmes and in specialist social work with children modules in the final year. This is an especially marked trend at postgraduate level. Child observation, usually but not exclusively taught in ‘Human growth and development’ or similar modules, also tends to be undertaken in the first year.

This arrangement seems consistent with an assumption that core skills are best learned prior to any specific consideration of their application to practice. However, this approach to learning specific skills with children within the generic award also depends for its success on...
Figure 5
Timing of teaching of communication skills with children: undergraduate programmes

Key:
CS: generic communication skills
CYP: children and young people
SWP: generic social work practice
HGD: human growth and development

Figure 6
Timing of teaching of communication skills with children: postgraduate programmes

Key:
CS: generic communication skills
CYP: children and young people
SWP: generic social work practice
HGD: human growth and development
the extent to which college-based teaching is integrated with practice learning on placement.

There is a good deal of uncertainty and discomfort among programme providers about current strategies for meeting the requirements of a generic preparation for practice for all students and the chance of increased specialisation for some.

The survey confirmed that no programme is able to guarantee that a student would practice direct communication with children during their pre-registration training. All respondents reported that, while the opportunity was nominally made available for such practice experience, placement availability and student preference would determine the extent to which direct contact with children took place. The significant increase in days available for practice learning has made no substantive difference in this respect. The reason for this is the lack of expectation that programmes should require students to practice directly with children in order to meet the claim that the generic award ‘prepares social workers for practice across the range of social work services, including working with children and families’. 279, p 5

Practice example 1 shows how one university has maximised the opportunity for students to work with children in their initial placement, by maintaining their own social work agency. However, this initiative has not been designed explicitly to facilitate communication with children.

Practice example 1

University of Hull, MA/PG Diploma in Social Work

BA (Hons) Social Work
Practice learning: Family Assessment and Support Unit

Students have a unique opportunity to take advantage of a practice learning opportunity in the university’s own voluntary social work agency. The Family Assessment and Support Unit (FASU), which opened in 1994, is a social work service offering support for children and families. Students will probably spend
their first placement in FASU, following a scheme designed to enhance their professional skills and to ensure consonance between the practical and theoretical parts of the programme.

In the majority of programmes, practice learning is more directly linked with college-based teaching on social work with children in the final year. The claim that ‘most students become increasingly specialist in areas in which they undertake supervised practice’ is supported only in part for direct practice with children.

The survey shows that three approaches have emerged in response to the challenge of adequately preparing students who, while on a generic programme, will be practising in agencies with specialist children’s services roles and responsibilities. Figure 7 shows that a few HEIs have made no specific arrangements at all to enable students to link final year placements with children with specific modules on social work practice in children’s services. Fewer still have retained the previous DipSW model of ‘childcare pathways’, which require students to choose the relevant pathway teaching. Most have decided to enable students to opt for a relevant social work practice module or modules.

**Figure 7**
Approaches to specialisation

The following practice examples illustrate the differing approaches to curriculum design illuminated by the survey. Practice example 2 is a wholly generic programme with an emphasis on applied social work practice skills.
Practice example 2

University of Kingston, BA in Social Work

Level 1
Becoming a professional
Critical thinking for professional practice
Social policy: The context of social work
Human growth and development
Social work approaches
Law and citizenship
Applied professional ethics

Level 2
Developing professional practice
Reflection and evaluation of practice
Assessment and intervention within applied law and policy frameworks
Social issues and social work practice

Level 3
Becoming a critical professional
Practice study
Research and evaluation methods in human services
Interprofessional perspectives and managing change
Integrated project

There were also a small number of programmes where the previous DipSW ‘area of particular practice’ approach had been retained. In Practice example 3, the previous ‘pathway’ approach has been retained, and core generic skills teaching on communication in the first year underpins applied specialist practice teaching corresponding to the final placement.
Practice example 3

University of Middlesex, BA (Hons) in Social Work

Level 1
Introduction to professional practice
Core skills in social science
Psychology for social workers
Communication skills in direct practice
Social policy and social work

Level 2
Social work research
Initial professional practice placement
Law for social workers
Social work models and methods
Ethics in professional practice

Level 3
Systems in practice
Practice-specific elective: Children, young people and families
or Adult needs and access to services or Youth justice
Final professional practice placement

In Practice example 4, the dominant approach to ‘increasing specialisation’ is illustrated. Here students are enabled to mix and match options to create their own specialist learning in social work with children, to run alongside their placement.
University of Nottingham, MA/PG Diploma in Social Work

Year 1, Semester 1
Introduction to social work
Law for social work
Human development through the life span
Power and discrimination: Social work, social welfare and the promotion of social justice
Fitness for practice

Year 1, Semester 2
Social work in organisations

Year 2, Semester 1
Optional modules
For the optional modules, participants will take one module from the first group of two options and one module from the second group of three options:
Either
Social work with adults: Policy
or
Social work with children and families: Law and policy
And either
Contemporary social work practice with adults
or
Contemporary social work practice with children and families
or
Contemporary social work practice in the voluntary sector

Year 2, Semester 2
Research and social work: The dissertation module
60 credits for the MA, additional component for the postgraduate diploma
These three main findings on curriculum design provide some indication of emerging approaches to the location, integration and development of the learning of specific communication skills with children on the new qualifying award. However, they provide little reassurance that this aspect of the curriculum has been firmly consolidated within programmes or that the tension between providing a generic training for all students and increasingly specialist skills for some has been resolved. In particular, no programme providers surveyed have thought it necessary or found a way to ensure that each student has direct practice contact with a child during training. The absence of guaranteed contact with real children might be expected to create pressure on college-based modules to provide sufficient opportunities for students to learn and develop communication skills with children in the classroom or skills laboratory.

It may well be that the ambitions of the social work award themselves are having a mixed impact on curriculum development. Survey respondents reported that the requirement of students to demonstrate ‘fitness for practice’ and (temporary) GSCC funding for ‘skills’ development had provided an opportunity to focus on skills. However, the loss of 70 additional days from college-based teaching for practice learning created an overpacked curriculum. This problem was accentuated by escalating student numbers and increased teaching group size. Creating a facilitative learning environment for in-depth learning was becoming harder. The next set of findings show how the task is being approached.

### 3.7.2 Learning outcomes and teaching methods

The research review identified differing assumptions by social work educators and researchers about the aims and intended outcomes of teaching communication skills. A skills acquisition approach tended to see ‘skills’ as social behaviours to be acquired primarily through task-centred instruction and practice. Competence and proficiency in the application of, and reflection on, skills and techniques of communication was the aim of training. A capability-building approach, by contrast, concentrated on the communicative capacity of the student underpinning the performance of any specified skill. The capacity for emotional or ethical engagement with distressed or oppressed children was emphasised in psychosocial or problem-based orientations within a capability-building approach.
Reflection here was expected to be on the capacity of self as well as on the performance of skilled behaviour.

In both cases, capability and skill were understood to be *transferable individual attributes*. However, teaching and learning were expected to be experiential and interactive, with individual learning taking place in group settings. This is consistent with accounts that understand teaching and learning as *socially situated activities and identities*. 284, 285

We analysed data from our practice survey in the light of these findings and in relation to the emerging patterns of curriculum design outlined above.

### 3.7.2.1 Learning outcomes

In respect of learning outcomes, there are three main findings, each of which we discuss in turn.

**Research-informed perspectives on what counts as relevant and effective learning for communication with children do not consistently inform module design.**

It is possible to construct a model of ideal typical aims and objectives to aid the mapping of emerging arrangements. However, it is important to recognise that programmes generally, on the evidence of our informants and programme documentation, have yet to develop any consistent integration of learning objectives within and across modules. In Figure 8, four contrasting categories of learning aims and objectives are produced by mapping the research review distinction between *skilled behaviour* and *personal capability* with the practice survey distinction between *core communication* and *applied practice skills* modules. Illustrative examples of modules for each category are presented to demonstrate the ways in which contrasting objectives are incorporated in teaching.

**Category A** aims and objectives refer to the development of a communicative capacity in students in relation to core skills of engagement. The primary example of this approach was provided by modules in which *child observation* was undertaken. However, there were also examples of modules that focused on the broader capabilities of students in bringing together their personal, academic and professional selves.
In Practice example 5, the skill of being observant is linked to learning about self through getting in touch with the experience of children. This develops the capacity to think about experience while seeing how children exist within social relationships.

**Practice example 5**

**University of East Anglia, MA in Social Work**

**Year 1: Human growth and behaviour (child observation)**

The aims of the child observation teaching are to:

- develop the ability to look steadily at the child – remaining focused on the child’s experience, the child’s emotions and small details of the child’s behaviour, such as how the child relates to others
- attempt the difficult task of seeing the world through the child’s eyes – an important element in any work with children
• begin to understand the environment of the child – nursery, play group, home – and the relationships between carers and children
• focus on thinking rather than doing: developing observational skills rather than offering help – that is, resisting the flight into activity
• develop the observation experience as an impetus to thinking about what you as a person and as a professional bring to your work.

In Practice example 6, the emphasis is more unequivocally on the *emotional engagement* between observer and child (or adult) and the *reflective capacity* developed by maintaining an observant stance.

Practice example 6

**University of Reading, BA (Hons) in Social Work**

**Level 2: Mental health through the life cycle**

Aims: To provide social workers with the knowledge of emotional development and mental/illness through the life cycle, and of the difficulties that may arise at different stages, in sensitive social work practice. They need to be able to engage in complex family and other situations while simultaneously retaining the capacity to reflect on the meaning of what is happening for the different people involved.

A third example retains the focus on experience, relationships and emotional engagement and adds to it ethical considerations of professional identity and anti-oppressive dynamics.
Practice example 7

Goldsmiths, University of London, MA in Social Work

Year 1: Infant and child observation (ICO)
Aims: The ICO project aims to give students the opportunity to closely observe the behaviour, development and emotional life of babies and young children. The observation enables students to explore a child’s relationship with his/her carers, the meaning of play and organisational and psychological aspects of group care. On the basis of the observation students are encouraged to explore a range of different theoretical perspectives about child development.

The process of observation enables students to reflect on personal values and the power of values to shape professional thinking and response. In this context the ICO project contributes to the exploration and development of a student’s professional identity and an understanding of oppression and anti-oppressive social work practice.

A final example in this category is of a module that links aspects of personal capacity with core communication skills as an introduction to social work practice.

Practice example 8

University of Chichester, BA (Hons) in Social Work

Skills in personal and professional development 1

Aims:
• develop the intellectual and practical skills of the student that will be of value in a variety of situations including
working with others, the development of self-awareness, problem solving, reflection and reflexivity

• prepare students to communicate effectively with a range of people in a complex and diverse society
• enable students to identify existing skills and knowledge and to take responsibility for developing and using these skills in a competent way
• introduce students to the ethical issues and codes of practice in relation to intervening in the lives of others.

*Category B* aims and objectives are primarily behavioural with learning outcomes demonstrated in the performance of core skills of engagement. These aims were expected to be met in modules with titles like ‘Interviewing skills’ or ‘Communication skills’. It was apparent from considering their aims that some modules sought some element of integration of personal capacity with demonstrated skill, while others were described wholly in behavioural terms. The example given is integrative.

Practice example 9

**University of York, MA in Social Work**

**Year 1: Interviewing skills: Interviewing individuals**

Aims: To increase students’ understanding of and competence in the skills required for successful communication for individuals.

Learning outcomes: By the end of this course, students who have attended the classes and undertaken the complementary reading should be able to:

• identify core skills in communicating with individuals
• demonstrate a responsive and responsible approach to communicating with individuals
• be able to provide a critical analysis of their own work on videotape.
**Category C** aims and objectives refer to *skilled behaviour in social work practice*, itself possibly underpinned by the competent performance of core engagement and communication skills. These aims were usually attached to modules with titles such as ‘Intervention methods’ or ‘Social work processes and practice’ and those having specifically to do with social work with children, such as ‘Working with children and families’.

**Practice example 10**

**Sheffield Hallam University, BA (Hons) in Social Work Studies**

**Level 2: Intervention methods**
The aim of this module is to build on the learning in the Year 1 ‘Communication skills’ course and subsequent development of the student in Practice 1. This course enables you to learn about a range of methods of intervention that can be applied in social work, and gives the opportunity to practice some of the skills from the different approaches.

As in the ‘Communication skills’ course in Year 1, you will be required to consider your own development as a practitioner and your ‘use of self’ as a key component in the social work relationship.

**Category D** aims and objectives refer to the use of self as well as the use of technique in direct practice. As the previous practice example shows, these aims were often connected to those to do with practice skills.

This illustrative mapping process shows how contrasting research-informed perspectives on learning aims can be incorporated in teaching planning in and across modules. While it was not possible to map and analyse each of the 117 modules involved, survey respondents made clear that consistent and coherent approaches to focusing and linking specific aims in and beyond modules were unusual. Even when they were expressed, the clarity of objectives alone did not guarantee effective outcomes. The nature and range of learning opportunities provided to
achieve those outcomes needed to be sufficient and the available evidence suggests these opportunities are difficult to secure.

The embedding of teaching and learning means that, even where objectives are clearly specified, the time and opportunities available for core or applied practice skill development for work with children are restricted.

Respondents in the practice survey were asked to identify the different aspects of skill in communication with children taught in each module. A primary distinction was made between specific skills and general core conditions.

By specific skills, we mean both child-centred techniques and approaches, using play and geneograms as examples of non-verbal and expressive modes, and those to do with particular social work roles and practice contexts, using ‘life story work’ with adopted children and ‘wishes and feelings’ work with children in court as prompts in this case. By general core conditions, we mean respect, listening, empathy, summarising, explaining, consulting, negotiating and so forth. Finally, in respect of each of these aspects, we sought qualitative feedback on the extent to which teaching took account of issues of diversity and difference, giving as prompts communication with disabled children and in cross-cultural situations.

Using this approach, the practice survey provides evidence of three related aspects of the student experience of learning:

- teaching is less likely to focus on specific skills for communication with children than on general core conditions
- in any case, very little time is actually devoted to teaching communication with children in the generic and practice skills modules in which it is embedded
- issues of diversity, discrimination and cultural competence are said to be integrated into mainstream teaching. In very few cases indeed were examples given of teaching specific assistive and augmentive skills in communication – for example, with disabled children.
In effect, students almost invariably learn basic interviewing and communication skills in generic modules earlier in their programme. However, this teaching is rarely explicitly focused on the specific skills necessary to communicate effectively with children, especially in relation to issues of diversity. These specific skills are more likely to be taught in the applied practice modules, often taken later in the programme. Even then, skills for specific social work roles and contexts are not routinely taught. This indicates that consistency in the consolidation and development of communication skills for practice with children cannot generally be guaranteed under current arrangements.

Survey respondents confirmed that most teaching took place in single modules with no more than 20 credits attached to them (and often fewer). In generic communication and specialist practice modules alike, communication with children was often allocated one session only or was incorporated into a broader focus on the family context of intervention or on aspects of the social work role, especially assessment. In some cases, learning in generic modules was even less assured, with teaching about children being dependent on additional case material provided by tutors or brought by students from practice learning or personal experience. If this material was not available, the learning would remain focused on adults.

Furthermore, the embedding or adding of optional skills sessions into modules could also mean that students could avoid participation in experiential learning that they found personally challenging.

Some respondents reflected on the paradox that an increased focus on specific practice skills (for example, the use of the Department of Health assessment framework) appeared to have led to reduced time for teaching and learning the communication skills that underpinned the practice task. The apparent restriction of the social work role to the meeting of task-focused procedural demands and the reduced agency focus on direct practice with children had undermined the commitment of some programmes to maintain and extend the traditional emphasis on developing the ‘use of self’ in training. This issue is now being discussed more widely in the profession.7

Figures 9 and 10 give the details of the extent to which these respective aspects of communication are reportedly taught on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes respectively.
Figure 9
Aspects of communication taught: undergraduate programmes

Figure 10
Aspects of communication taught: postgraduate programmes
The rather tenuous and partial incorporation of learning and teaching communication with children in the qualifying award curriculum has consequences for the ways in which assessment is approached.

Specific skill in communication with children is not routinely and formally assessed in its own right.

The evidence of our survey on skills assessment supports our main finding in relation to teaching and learning. In neither college-based modules nor practice learning is there any expectation that a generic preparation for the social work profession ought to involve students in being assessed in direct communication with children. Unless child observation is taught and assessed, scrutiny of student performance in direct communication with children, including in simulated exercises, is often fortuitous.

On the evidence of the survey, the specific assessment of skill in communication with children is formally required on only a minority of programmes in both college-based and practice learning. This appears to be due partly to the embedded nature of the teaching and learning of this aspect of the curriculum and partly to the lack of any child-centred standards for such an assessment.

Respondents in around one third of all programmes reported that, as Figure 11 (below) shows, students were required to be formally assessed in college in their direct communication with either adults or children. While these direct forms of assessment could involve communication with children (albeit usually through role-play using fellow students), there was no expectation that it should, apart from in the one module that focused exclusively on direct practice with children (see Practice example 11 below). It is not possible to estimate what proportion of students would opt or have the opportunity to present simulated direct communication with children. Respondents indicated that it would likely be very few. Where skills were directly assessed, students were also required to reflect in writing on their competence and learning.

In around one quarter of programmes reflective assignments alone were the means by which this assessment was undertaken. These included essays on concepts of communication and reflective papers on direct practice observed on video. Individual and group presentations about
aspects of direct communication in practice were also used. Once again, these were not necessarily focused on practice with children and nor was communication in itself the primary or sole focus of these assignments. This was especially the case in applied practice modules where practice skills in the round were the focus of assessment.

In fewer cases still were child observation papers used as a mode of assessment. In most cases, these were in addition to other reflective assignments and/or the direct assessment of skill.

The assessment of communication skills with children in practice placements is equally undeveloped, on the evidence of the survey.

In no cases did respondents report that agreements or contracts specified that students would be explicitly assessed in direct practice and communication with children, even in children’s services placements. Instead, the assumption was that the focus and standards of practice skills assessment would be directly informed by the NOS for social work, and for students in children’s services placements, this was presumed to cover direct practice with children.

Similarly, no examples were given by respondents of any distinctive types of evidence that required students to demonstrate their competence in communication with children. Direct observations of practice by practice teachers/assessors are certainly required in every assessed placement. There is also a generally stated expectation that ‘service users and carers’ will be asked to give feedback on student performance in their case.
However, no respondent could confirm that these general expectations had been developed in ways that would require a focus in any placement, including in children’s services, on the demonstration and assessment of skill in direct communication with children.

Other available evidence does not contradict these findings. Activity reports of the use of the GSCC pump-priming funding of £16,000 over two years for each HEI to develop ‘skills laboratories’ are not sufficiently detailed for estimates to be made about the extent to which communication skills teaching is being enhanced. A significant proportion of the funding in 2004–05 was on video and audio equipment.\textsuperscript{286}

Practice learning workforce resources have to date been spent on establishing Learning Resource Network structures, mapping practice learning opportunities and organisational capacity building to ensure sufficient placements. The project work planned for 2005–2006 concerns these aims.

Innovative practice is only just developing. Guidance in relation to practice learning comprises general principles and approaches based on a self-directed learning model rather than the specification of any exemplary models, including those to do with learning communication skills in practice. The audit of models of practice learning prepared for the Practice Learning Taskforce and the National Organisation of Practice Teachers\textsuperscript{287} is similarly preoccupied with issues of location and organisation of practice learning as well as the changing perspectives on the student role such as seeing students as a ‘resource’ in agencies. Only 32 per cent of respondents (23/71) in this survey reported ‘innovative’ practice learning and none of this concerned the quality of direct practice by students. Only in relation to ‘fitness for practice learning’ were examples reported of student contact with ‘service users’, but in none of these was practice with children mentioned.

However, there are examples of strategic developments that might be expected to stimulate interest in the quality as well as the organisation of practice learning and contribute to the debate about how social work qualifying education might be adapted to meet the requirements of the ‘children’s services’ workshop. Two developments seem promising:

• SWAP funding of the development of a social work skills website ‘designed to enable academics, students, practitioners, service users
and carers to work together and to share our knowledge and perspectives in this area’ (www.swap.ac.uk/about/projects05.asp)
• a number of Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), which will focus on practice learning in the social care and health sectors (www.swap.ac.uk/quality/cetl.asp).

3.7.2.2 Teaching methods

Three main findings emerged from the survey of teaching methods:

• Any focus on providing a facilitating environment for the development of a personal communicative capability is peripheral compared to approaches that emphasise skill acquisition and critical reflection.
• The use of contrasting methods confirms the existence of differing perspectives on what might count as appropriate learning for effective practice.
• Although in a number of cases teaching and learning on college-based modules was directly linked to practice learning, no specific attention to communication with children was given.

The findings on the modes of assessment employed on qualifying award programmes indicate the extent to which skilled communication with children has ceased to be a central learning outcome in social work education. When teaching methods used on programmes are mapped, the focus on personal capability in communication appears to be losing out in the limited time made available. In the research review, the use of experiential learning methods was reported and advised. Experiential methods could be interactive, such as in the use of role-play for skills acquisition; they could be more directly personal, with observation being the dominant method for capability building, or they could be a mix of the two.

The survey indicates that interactive experiential methods are prevalent if somewhat less so than direct and didactic teaching, as Figures 12 and 13 (below) show. Here it can be seen that ‘talking and telling’ (that is, direct teaching and instruction) was the most favoured teaching method, often in association with what we called ‘showing and practising’ (that is, interactive experiential methods such as role-play). By contrast, the
**Figure 12**
Methods of teaching communication: undergraduate programmes

- Being observant: 61 Yes, 2 No, 4 Maybe, 10 Unknown
- Talking and telling: 65 Yes, 4 No, 2 Maybe, 6 Unknown
- Showing and practising: 53 Yes, 4 No, 3 Maybe, 17 Unknown
- Sharing personal experience of childhood: 36 Yes, 4 No, 11 Maybe, 26 Unknown

**Figure 13**
Methods of teaching communication: postgraduate programmes

- Being observant: 31 Yes, 5 No, 1 Maybe, 6 Unknown
- Talking and telling: 32 Yes, 5 No, 1 Maybe, 5 Unknown
- Showing and practising: 27 Yes, 5 No, 3 Maybe, 8 Unknown
- Sharing personal experience of childhood: 18 Yes, 5 No, 9 Maybe, 11 Unknown
capacity of ‘being observant’ and the ‘sharing of personal experience of childhood’ (for example, through the use of personal geneograms) were much less widely employed as methods of teaching and learning.

These findings confirm the decline of child observation as a significant method of learning. Where observation was employed as a method, it was most likely achieved by having students view videos in seminars or by offering them the option of conducting a short observation as part of a placement or module. In each case, the absence of an integrated and cumulative observation seminar meant that the exploration of personal experience and learning from it was largely incidental. Where the Tavistock/DipSW model of child observation (discussed earlier in the research review) had been retained, personal experience was still at the heart of the learning process.

Our categorisation of aspects of communication, and methods of teaching them, confirmed the existence of differing perspectives on what might count as appropriate learning for effective practice.

For some respondents, our emphasis was too functional. They argued that the key issue was the responsibility of social work educators to provide a facilitating environment for student learning. This could mean giving careful attention to creating an emotionally safe setting in which students could share experiences and feelings in reaction to their exposure to children, through observation or in direct practice, as a basis for fuller reflection on their use of self. Alternatively it could mean giving greater attention to problem-based approaches and student presentations, in which communication in itself as a professional capability would be developed. Particularly valued in this respect was the link between a core capacity for critical reflection and developed skills in communicating this in interaction as well as in writing.

Other respondents thought our categories were too vocational and instrumental in focus. The emphasis here was on teaching theoretical perspectives and research findings about the particular communication needs of children, the view being that the application of this knowledge was a matter for practice learning. ‘Learning about’ rather than ‘learning how’ was the task to be tackled. Critical reflection would focus on what was said about effective communication rather than on what the student had done.

In general, respondents found it important that the proper boundaries be established in experiential and interactive methods between requiring
students to reflect on their professional and their personal identities or selves. It was apparent that lines were being drawn in different places by different tutors, with more or less emphasis being placed on the need for personal exploration as a basis for developing professional ethics and skills.

Our survey focus was on face-to-face communication. On reflection, we regretted this, especially once our parallel research review exposed the dearth of information in the published literature on approaches to teaching written communication, including using ICT. However, very few of our respondents chose to highlight any specific efforts made to teach students effective written communication. In the light of the findings on face-to-face communication, we are convinced that, despite the absence of any direct enquiry, we have not missed any significant body of practice that ought to have been illuminated by this survey.

In a number of cases, teaching and learning on college-based modules were directly linked to practice learning. This was a main feature of those modules with titles such as ‘Preparation for practice’, in which experience in an initial short placement was used as material for teaching. Where child observation was taught, student contact with children and class-based learning through reflection were directly linked in the observation seminar. Many programmes had retained concurrent practice learning and students could bring case material into class on a regular basis. In each of these examples, it was the reflective aspect of learning about communication that was facilitated.

However, the survey uncovered very few examples of how the transfer to practice placements ensured that communication capability and skill with children developed in college. One way in which skill might be expected to be consolidated is through requiring its demonstration in assessed work. However, we have shown that this cannot be relied on. Otherwise it might be expected that collaborative relationships between academic staff and practice assessors would provide the context for joint approaches in skills teaching. In fact, the responses we had to our question about links suggest that such joint strategies are extremely rare, at least in relation to this aspect of the curriculum. Practitioners themselves were certainly regularly invited in to college-based teaching sessions to share expertise of various kinds, as Figure 14 (below) shows. But individual student-centred links across college and practice contexts appear to be undeveloped.
Practice example 11 is a well-established collaborative model that has been designed specifically for teaching and learning communication (interviewing) skills. It does not have a particular focus on children.

Practice example 11

University of York, MA/PG Diploma in Social Work/BA (Hons) in Social Work

Practice learning: A collaborative model for direct observation

In this model, a method of direct observation of interviewing skills is used collaboratively in both college-based teaching and practice learning. Developed first in the 'Interviewing skills' course at the university, the approach has been transferred to learning on placement. The aim has been for academic staff and practice teachers to work in partnership to improve the overall professional training of students.

Using the collaborative model helps to create a learning environment in which practice teachers and students acquire communication skills of a high order, equipping them to work effectively with each other, with fellow professionals and with a wide range of service users.

The collaborative model functions alongside a competence-based assessment process for students on placement. It allows well-founded evidence to be identified, and goes beyond the performance of technical skills to include developing the capacity to reflect fully on professional practice.
3.7.3 Involvement of children

The survey confirmed that children themselves are becoming actively involved in module design, teaching and assessment, but there are contrasting views about how best this involvement should be focused.

There is now an expectation, shared by the young consultants on this review as well as by policy makers, that ‘service users and carers’ should be involved as ‘stakeholders’ in all aspects of the design and delivery of social work training.\(^1\) This position has been unequivocally endorsed in professional practice guidance,\(^{288}\) where it is said to offer ‘a major opportunity for a new generation of social workers to gain a thorough grounding in service users’ and carers’ experiences and expectations from the very start of their training and careers’ (\(^{288},\) p 2).

However, there is also an absence of independent research evidence on the extent to which ‘users and carers’ of any age or circumstance are involved directly in social work education or on the impact of that involvement.\(^{288,289}\) A recent practice survey and resource guide on communication skills generally in social work education\(^{290}\) lists only four practice examples where some element of ‘user participation’ in planning, delivery and evaluation of teaching and learning took place. Only one of these involved children. The indication is that experience of involving ‘service users and carers’ in general is ‘unevenly spread across universities and also across course modules within one university’ and that few social work programmes have yet ‘firmly embedded service user- and carer-led inputs’ (\(^{290},\) p 36) consistently in their teaching.

Figure 14 shows the number of programmes surveyed that reported their direct inclusion in teaching on those modules where communication skills were taught.

These figures suggest that the contribution of children and other ‘service users and carers’ is becoming a feature of teaching and learning social work programmes. Taking the two groups together, respondents told us that 22 programmes (69 per cent) invited their participation. However, it is important to consider the extent and nature of this involvement, especially in respect of children. In the first place, it should be recalled that only one module was solely devoted to communication skills with children and that the majority of modules provided only minimal time for this aspect of learning. Where children were involved, it was always briefly. Second, we found that ‘brief’ usually also meant
‘episodic’. This was not always the case, however, and this realisation led us to identify and define two main approaches that appeared to be used: ‘opportunistic’ and ‘strategic’.

In the opportunistc approach, a child or young person would become involved on the basis of availability. For example, a student would invite someone being worked with in placement to participate or an academic tutor would ask a mother and daughter who had received counselling in a local agency to contribute their experiences and views. Students or tutors might contact a local support group for children and ask members to lead or contribute to a session. However, it could not be predicted, in these cases, that this kind of involvement would be retained or developed year on year.

In the strategic approach, it was apparent that teaching contributions were planned as part of an overall strategy of involvement of ‘service users and carers’, including children. A small number of programmes had set up or were in the process of developing groups of ‘service users’ to support programme delivery. It was within this context that both adults and children participated in the teaching process. This happened in two main ways. In some cases, the contribution was only indirect, people being involved in curriculum development alone. In others, it was direct as well – for example, one group of children making and showing a video and then participating in role-plays with students, and another beginning to work with academic tutors on laboratory-based micro-skills training.

These last examples were rare. They were said to depend for their
successful implementation on the sustained personal interest of one or more academic staff and significant investment by the college or by the GSCC, through ‘skills’ or ‘service user’ funding.

We also found uncertainty among some academic staff about the legitimacy and effectiveness of asking certain children to position themselves as ‘service users’ for teaching purposes. Some respondents thought that simulations of ‘real’ situations were effective because they drew on ‘basic humanity and experience’ and this gave them ‘authenticity’. Others wondered who would benefit from the direct involvement of children. For example, it was not clear to them that the children were being advantaged by being confirmed in an identity such as ‘care leaver’ for as long as it suited social work professionals to call them that. They also thought it could place both students and children in an ambiguous position, especially if children were involved in role-plays where they played themselves for real in an educational rather than a service setting. Issues of boundaries and their management were thought to be problematic, a particular concern being confidentiality and safety for local children used in this way. In some instances, this was a concern shared by college managers, who were also reportedly anxious about questions of insurance.

Other respondents were more convinced of the benefits of directly involving children in college-based teaching, although in the examples we were given, no children were expected to participate directly in student role-play exercises. Nonetheless, they reported that the children who participated in curriculum development on their programmes had themselves insisted that they present their personal experiences (of living in public care) to students. In two cases, children made videos, believing these would provide a far more authentic or ‘real’ sense of the experience of people like them. Practice example 12 presents one model. Standard social work training videos – for example, *The child’s world* 97 – were reportedly seen by some children as bland by comparison because they failed to convey the emotions stirred up by the experience of social work intervention. Using self-made videos, designing case studies based on experience and advising on role-plays with students were said to be appropriate and effective teaching strategies. It appeared that the young people retained a sense of control over the process and content of their involvement. They also reportedly valued the status and skills developed as a result of the experience of teaching at a university.
Practice example 12

Goldsmiths, University of London, MA in Social Work

Year 2: Study unit: Partnership in long-term planning
Students are introduced to the study unit and provided with a study pack, which includes reading resources, reading lists, a scenario and a copy of a video made by the young people. The scenario (scripted by the young people) concerns a young child who has been in foster care. Students are asked to consider plans for the future and to role-play a looked-after children review.

The video is intended to have several trigger effects:

• to provide an example for those who have not attended an LAC review
• to show how professionals work together
• to demonstrate communication with children and young people
• to reveal the role of the social worker.

A young care leaver is invited to one of the facilitated study group sessions where the students will be encouraged to ask questions relating to the scenario that will inform their decisions.

The students video their role-play, and this video is then observed and commented on by the academic facilitator and the young person.

This approach to the direct involvement of children in teaching has been presented at a conference. The student presenter reported a positive impact on learning, which included:
• shock and disbelief at the video showing the experiences of the young people
• challenges to assumptions about the capability of ‘looked-after children’
• the importance of being faced with ‘real’ experiences
• recognition of professional power and the need to be child-focused.

An alternative approach reported by one respondent was to use children to role-play ‘service users’, thereby adapting a tradition in social work education of using actors in interviewing and communication skills training. This model is described in Practice example 13.

Practice example 13

University of Nottingham, MA/PG Diploma in Social Work

Year 2 (tbc): Skills in working with children/young people
As part of this module (see Practice example 1), students work with members of Carlton TV Junior Workshop, a group of largely secondary-age children and young people in a three-day workshop held during a school half-term holiday.

Day 1
Workshop on life story work and play communications with younger members of Carlton Junior Workshop

Days 2/3
Video role-play interviews with older workshop members (Group A).

Five scenarios are role-played, the following being one example:

Scene: The lounge of your foster parents’ house

You have lived with your foster parents for as long as you can
remember, and have had no contact with your birth parents. You would like to be adopted and are sensitive about the fact that your last name is different from theirs. You are also worried that something might happen to take you away from them. These worries have become worse lately, and have meant that you have been on a very short fuse. Other kids at school have cottoned on to the fact that they can wind you up by teasing you about your name. Yesterday your best friend joined in and you completely lost it. Your friend’s head was cut open and they had to go to hospital. You have been suspended from school for a week. Your foster parents have asked your social worker to call, but she is off sick, so a different one has come (again).

The use of children whose reasons for contributing were their age and acting skills, rather than their identification as ‘service users’, was said to address concerns raised about child well-being and safety. The method still presented students with direct experience of communication with ‘real’ children who either played the ‘service user’ role or used their own experience – for example, in the life story exercise.

The contribution of children themselves to the assessment process is shown in Figure 15. By comparing this with the findings presented in Figure 14 (above), it is apparent that this role is less prevalent than that of direct contribution to teaching and learning.

**Figure 15**
Contributors to assessment by programme
Children were only involved in student assessment in those modules where the demonstration of skill was required. Once again, this involvement was often fortuitous, deriving from arrangements for ‘service user and carer’ inclusion that was predominantly adult. There were very few indications that any systematic arrangements for child participation had been developed.

In the small number of programmes where children had been involved, the formative and collaborative aspect of their assessment role was emphasised. Children participated in ‘fishbowl’ or ‘panel’ evaluations of student role-plays and/or video presentations. In these ways, student reflection was expected to be enhanced by the addition of the perspectives of children themselves as well as having their skills judged in the moment. However, in one case it was reported that it was the children who argued that skilled performance itself should be ‘tested’.

Practice examples 13 (above) and 14 (below) illustrate practice in this respect.

### Practice example 14

**University of Birmingham, MA/BA in Social Work**

**Year 1/Level 1: Fitness to practice**

This module includes a workshop session that includes an interviewing assessment.

Students are provided with a scenario and then conduct a 10-minute role-played interview with a drama student taking the part of the ‘client’. The interview is videotaped. A panel of assessors, which includes young ‘service users and carers’, observes the interview live and scores student performance on eight areas of communication skills. Students are given immediate feedback and expected to view the video in the light of that feedback. Students must repeat the exercise until they meet the required standard.
In Practice example 15, the combined assessment of written and face-to-face communication skills is exceptional. In this case, although the practical task is focused on communication with a child, it might be an adult ‘service user’ who sits on the assessment panel.

Practice example 15

University of Derby, BA (Hons) in Applied Social Work

Level 1: Communication skills

This module is assessed in two ways:

• a 2,000-word essay
• two practical tests.

The practical tests enable students to demonstrate a range of effective communication.

The first is completed individually in the form of a role-play set within a scenario. Students watch a video that shows, for example, a 12-year-old boy currently in foster care who wants to go home but the statutory review has decided he cannot. Playing the part of the social worker, the student must relay this information to the boy.

In the second test, students again watch a video of a case scenario and must then write a letter to a GP requesting a joint appointment in the light of the facts emerging from the video.

A panel consisting of a member of the academic staff, a local agency development worker and a ‘service user’ assesses student performance. Students must pass both tests, as well as write a satisfactory essay.
3.8 Findings 2: Survey of allied professions programmes

The secondary survey was designed to explore how communication skills with children are thought about, taught and assessed in professional education within a range of allied professions. That survey’s findings are presented in the following three sections.

3.8.1 How communication skills with children are thought about in professional education

As shown in Table 2, 10 of the 13 professional bodies that responded to this part of the questionnaire consider communication skills with children and young people as a basic skill to be taught at pre-registration.

Table 2
Level at which communication skills with children are taught

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Basic, pre-registration level skill</th>
<th>Advanced, post-registration skill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td></td>
<td>•</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paediatrics</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing + midwifery</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational therapy</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiotherapy</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child psychotherapy</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play work</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family therapy</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Speech + language therapy</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>•</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
level. Rather than dealing with a wide range of age groups across child and adult services, children are the primary concern of the professions represented by these 10 bodies. The three other bodies consider communication skills with children to be a post-registration specialised skill; they teach more generic communication skills at the pre-registration/probationer level of training.

In the professions we were able to make contact with, our respondents indicated that communication with children is addressed from three perspectives.

3.8.2 Communication with children as a basic and fundamental skill

This model – unsurprisingly – seems most prevalent in professions where most or all work is direct with children. For example, all trainee teachers must meet the standards for qualified teacher status (QTS). These standards are outcome statements, many of which directly relate to effective communication with children. However, there is no single explicit communication skills standard itself. Again, in the benchmark statements for the playwork unit, which is part of SkillsActive: The Sector Skills Council for Active Leisure and Learning and within the Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP), communication with children is seen as a basic skill for their profession.

3.8.3 Communication with children as an advanced level skill

In three professions, direct communication with children is seen as beyond the scope of initial qualifying training. For instance, in the police service it is offered in greater depth to experienced police officers. Most forces offer advanced level training on interviewing children, ranging from one- to four-week courses often with associated supervised practice. In allied health professions such as occupational therapy and physiotherapy, skills in communicating with children will be taught and assessed once the practitioner has moved into a specialist post-qualification position.
3.8.4 Communication with children as a therapeutic tool

Professions such as play therapy, child psychotherapy (analytic) and family therapy teach communication as a therapeutic tool at an initial generic level during pre-registration training. Specialist post-registration skills development can continue in the post-registration period.

These different ways of thinking about communication with children are reflected in different approaches to teaching and assessment. These are explored below.

3.8.5 How communication skills with children are taught and assessed in allied professional education

Methods of assessing communication skills with children vary across individual training providers but relate to competencies and standards of practice where stipulated by professional bodies. However, even in those professions where communication skills with children were expected to be taught at pre-registration level, it could not be assumed that standards of competence in this aspect of the curriculum would actually be specified. Six of the 10 professions that expected communication with children to be included at pre-registration level did specify such standards (paediatrics and child health, nursing, playwork, speech and language therapy, play therapy and teaching). The Royal College of Nursing requires evidence, presented within continuing professional development portfolios, of competence in direct communication with children and young people.

Approaches to teaching and assessing performance also vary across professions. In four cases (paediatricians, art therapists, teachers and playworkers), children and young people are directly involved in pre-registration training – through videos of consultancies (paediatricians), role-play involving children (playworkers, paediatricians) and engaging with children in the classroom setting (teachers).

Three professions – paediatricians, child psychotherapists (analytic) and teachers – teach communication with children in the practice setting and in the taught modules. The taught element, employed by child psychotherapists (analytic) and playworkers, includes role-play, reflection and methods of alternative and augmentative communication.

Innovative approaches were identified by five professional bodies,
which are given as examples here to illustrate the range of teaching and assessment provided at pre-registration level:

Example 1: we identified a range of teaching methods for pre-registration training for medical students at King’s College Hospital, London. This involves experiential learning in addition to more formal communication skills training, carried out in a communication clinical laboratory. The experiential component involves children accompanied by trained actors for one three-hour session in Year 4. The children work with simple scenarios such as having asthma or needing to have a scan. The children selected are usually between 6 and 10 years old; they may have ongoing illnesses but this would not affect their selection. They are reported to enjoy the role-play sessions, while the students have rated the sessions highly, both for interest and for learning value.

Example 2: paediatricians in training develop their communication skills with children and their families through role-play and video-recorded consultations. However, these can focus as much on communication with parents about their children as on communication with children themselves. Paediatricians also receive informal feedback on their communication with families as part of the ongoing appraisal and assessment of their work. Within paediatrics, a new instrument is under development that provides reproducible profiles of communication performance and includes an increased level of children’s views in evaluating performance.

Example 3: in pre-registration nurse training, University College, Northampton, offers workshops on communication with children who do not communicate conventionally (timed prior to working with children who have learning disabilities) and on engaging and disengaging (prior to working with children and young people and mental illness). These workshops are taught by practitioners/experts and followed by taught sessions and evidence within portfolios including direct communication with children and families.

Example 4: in midwifery training, the University of Luton recommends well-led, small-group reflective sessions with a clear agenda. Creating a safe environment in which to speak one’s thoughts, where responding
to the range of their own and others’ feelings, generates listening rather than instant reactions.

Example 5: the Teacher Training Agency states that all trainee teachers must meet the standards for QTS, detailed in Qualifying to teach (available at www.teach-tta.gov.uk/qualifyingtoteach). These standards are outcome statements that must be met by the end of the training programme. Although there is no single standard prescribing how teachers should communicate with children, many standards directly relate to effective communication with children. Many standards are also indirectly related to communication or cannot be met if communication with children is not carried out effectively. Programmes vary in teaching and learning approaches. All trainees will be assessed on their skills in classrooms while teaching children. This includes observations by school-based and college-based tutors and mentors and a portfolio of evidence against the QTS standards.

Example 6: in occupational therapy, the pre-qualification training includes class exercises on communication skills, communication training and social skills training, which are taught both experientially and academically. Occupational therapists also learn to use assisted methods of non-verbal communication, such as British Sign Language, Makaton, computers (including voice-activated ones) and assistive technology. All graduating occupational therapist students would be familiar with all of these methods, which are applicable to work with both adults and children. Clients can be involved in this teaching, although the College of Occupational Therapy acknowledges that there are issues to consider, such as consent, payment and the college not being seen to use clients unethically. Occupational therapy students use art, drama and music as vehicles to encourage communication, especially in mental health settings.

Example 7: in the Royal Alexandra Children’s Hospital in Brighton, children are involved in the assessment of communication skills in pre-registration medical students.

Innovative approaches were also reported at the post-registration stage.
• The Open University distance learning course ‘Child development and communication’ has an open structure with supervisory and tutorial support. The course materials have been devised using observational skills and digital video with a unique annotation facility (Focus Project at the Open University). Some of the video footage involves young people.
• University College Hospital in London has in-service workshops provided by play therapists for all disciplines and grades of hospital staff, which include: summary of research on empathising; the Piagetian developmental framework; challenges of delivering child-centred services; ice-breaking techniques; and distraction tools. Feedback indicates that 100 per cent of participants felt that their practice had improved, and 80 per cent said that their confidence had improved.
• As well as training young people aged 12–18 years in the delivery of basic skills training, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) involves young people by proxy through the use of their drawings, written words and video.
• Triangle involves children and young people in the development of training, publications and videos, and involves young people in the design and delivery of training. Triangle provides training in communicating with children, particularly with those with communication impairments, on a national basis to single-discipline groups at pre and post-qualification level and to multidisciplinary, multiagency groups. Children as young as three have taken part in the production of video material designed to teach communication skills. Course participants can practice communication skills with disabled teenagers and young adults.

In summary, the survey of programmes of allied professions identified a variable range of approaches to the teaching and assessment of communication skills. To some extent, these reflect patterns apparent in the primary survey, with some structured assessment of practical skills, patchy involvement of children in the teaching and assessment process and a lack of clarity around how to involve children in these programmes. However, there are examples of innovative practice and a number of definitions of communicative competence that could be adapted to inform social work programmes.
On the available evidence, and given the policy context, consideration must now be given to the introduction of a mandatory core communications module for all professions working directly with children and young people. This should include a values framework and the teaching and assessment of a range of communication skills.
Summary of knowledge review findings and implications for curriculum development

The aim of this knowledge review was to provide information both about what counts as effective communication in social work with children and about which methods of teaching and assessment might be best indicated, on the basis of research evidence and practice experience. In mapping the field, the intention was to identify examples of good practice that could inform curriculum development more widely.

4.1 Summary of findings

- Skilled communication with children has yet to be consolidated as a distinct and discrete topic in social work research or education. This means that frustratingly few examples of effective practice can be identified either in published reports or contemporary social work education. The distinctive aspects of engagement and communication with children tend to get obscured and marginalised in generic approaches to communication skills and in teaching on specific social work practice skills.
- As currently constituted, the ‘generic’ focus of social work qualifying award programmes inhibits the development of learning, teaching and assessment of skilled communication with children. There is a lack of clarity about the range and level of skill required. Social work students can be registered for practice without any direct experience of engagement with children or assessment of their skills in this field.
- Contrasting and changing views about the nature and purpose of skilled communication in social work with children are not yet reconciled in social work research and education. Assumptions about the intentionality and capability of children are now emerging alongside those that emphasise their vulnerability. However, these assumptions are not yet integrated within the curriculum despite the evidence
from social work practice that shows the importance of holding both perspectives in mind.

- The main focus in the college-based teaching and assessment of communication skills with children on the new social work qualifying award is learning about, trying out and reflecting on core skills. There is now much less emphasis on methods, such as child observation, that create a facilitating environment for developing an underpinning personal capability. Specific communication skills for practice with children are also less frequently taught. This is despite research evidence that suggests effective practice depends on social workers combining emotional capacity and ethical commitment with specialist skills: ‘being’ as well as ‘doing’.

- There is some evidence of direct involvement from children and young people in the design, teaching and assessment of communication skills, particularly in professions allied to social work. Although these developments are patchy and sporadic, they are entirely compatible with the value base of social work training, and initial indications are that, properly planned and implemented, the direct involvement of children and young people can have powerful impacts on thinking and practice.

These findings suggest that the new social work award is not yet equipping social work students in a reliable and consistent way to meet the developing expectations of practitioners entering what is now known as the ‘children’s services workforce’. They also suggest ways forward for programme providers. We conclude this report with a consideration of the implications of the review findings for curriculum development.

### 4.2 Implications for curriculum development

Three main messages for programme providers can be highlighted as a result of our review findings:

- Each programme needs to identify a children’s lead to ensure a ‘whole programme’ approach to curriculum development.
- There is a need to review assumptions about what counts as a generic preparation for skilled practice in social work, to ensure that communication with children is effectively included.
• Programme providers should seek to *clarify and integrate aims, learning objectives and teaching and assessment methods* to ensure that every student has both the personal capability and developed skill for the contrasting kinds of communication needed in practice.

### 4.3 Identifying a children’s lead and a ‘whole programme’ approach

The evidence is that children can get lost from sight on social work programmes as well as in social work practice. The embedding of teaching and learning communication skills with children in generic communication or applied practice skills modules contributes to this tendency. The lack of any particular requirement, in the NOS for social work, that students be assessed in their direct communication with children, means that practice and college-based learning and assessment in this area are not routinely linked. Social work programmes cannot currently articulate clearly how they are actually preparing students for practice that is consistent with the changing expectations of the workforce. The direct involvement of children as stakeholders in social work education is at a very early stage of development and is yet to be strategically managed across programmes.

In these circumstances, it might be helpful for a children’s lead to be identified in each case – that is, someone who could take up the role of leading developments across the curriculum. The evidence from the DipSW period (1992–2003) is that such developments (in that case, child observation) are given focus when external requirements and support are picked up and disseminated through nominated tutors. The contemporary external drivers for change are Department for Education and Skills guidance and GSCC financial support for ‘service user and carer’ involvement. Some programmes are already using the latter to underpin arrangements for the direct involvement of children, including in teaching and assessing aspects of communication skill. Effective models of curriculum development and child involvement would be developed more widely if each programme had a named person dedicated to that role.
4.4 Reviewing assumptions about, and arrangements for, teaching and assessing generic and specialist skills

Programme providers may need to review the structure and focus of their curriculum to ensure that all students are taught and assessed in the core capabilities and skills necessary (see below) for effective practice with children. Currently the trend is to teach and assess generic communication skills to a basic level to all students early in the college-based curriculum. A more specialist focus on skilled communication with children tends to be found in applied practice modules provided later in the programme, often in association with a practice placement and usually for some students only. This curriculum structure may appear sensible as a framework, but it does not currently guarantee an effective integration of learning of generic and specialist skills to a basic level in respect of the distinctive task of communication with children.

To achieve this aim, programmes probably have to develop the college-based curriculum in two ways. First, the core communication skills modules should be revised, where necessary, to include the teaching and learning of (specialist) skilled communication with children in their own right. The objective would be to ensure that all students have the opportunity at least to understand, simulate practice in and critically reflect on the distinctive nature of communication with children, no matter what agency setting they intend to work in. Second, the content of the applied practice skills modules in social work with children should be reviewed to ensure that students have further opportunities to develop skill in communication in relation to specific practice settings and roles with children.

In turn, practice learning arrangements should be made that ensure that all students have to have direct contact with children at some point during their 200 placement days. Many students currently get practice experience with children in one of their placements, but not all of them do. Where a student is not directly placed in a children’s services setting, it will be necessary to consider how engagement with children can be included at some point within non-children’s services practice settings. One way of making this happen is to require all students to present evidence in their practice portfolios of effective engagement and communication with at least one child. This does not currently seem to be a
requirement on programmes even when students are placed in children’s service settings. The most obvious means of achieving this is to write the expectation into practice learning agreements and require at least one of the assessed observations to focus at least in part on communication with a child. Another strategy, already employed on a few programmes, is to introduce child observation into the practice learning curriculum. There are implications here for seminar support to enable reflection on the observation experience. Observation notes and papers can either be prepared as practice evidence of communicative capability and presented in portfolios, or they can be submitted for academic assessment as part of a ‘communication skills’ or ‘human growth and development’ module.

### 4.5 Clarifying and integrating aims, learning objectives and teaching and assessment methods

Our research review has demonstrated that there is sufficient evidence and experience available to inform thinking about the most appropriate learning aims and outcomes and the most effective focus of teaching and assessment in this field.

In relation to **aims and learning objectives**, the following findings apply:

- Effective communication with children is more likely to happen when social workers explore and integrate different perspectives on children (as both vulnerable and capable), when the social work role and context for communication is considered and clear and when children’s experiences of oppression are actively addressed.
- A number of core conditions appear to underpin effective communication. These include: an ethically and emotionally engaged stance in which different levels of communication take place; a child-centred orientation where child-friendly methods and a child-directed process are employed; and an understanding of the developmentally distinctive nature and aspects of child communication.
- Specific aspects of skills are associated with these core conditions. These include: skills in keeping children informed, which requires adapting one’s own communication to make sense to children; effective listening; and skills in symbolic, creative, non-verbal and expressive techniques.
• Skills with young children and with children with impairments of communication require specific attention.

The message for programme providers is that curriculum planning and learning outcomes should be designed, first, to ensure that students are able to understand and deal with contrasting perspectives on children rather than take for granted partial categorisations (‘in need’, ‘vulnerable’, ‘service user’, ‘social actor’ and so on). Current teaching and assessment arrangements, with their emphasis on critical reflection, provide the opportunity for this process where it is not already undertaken. Second, whether located in generic communication skills modules where core communication skills are already taught, or in applied social work practice modules, teaching will need to be personally challenging and facilitative as well as instructive about child-centred skills.

In relation to teaching and assessment methods, the following findings apply:

• Programmes should endeavour explicitly to provide a facilitating environment in which the methods of teaching and assessment that are used model the conduct that is expected of students in their practice. Episodic teaching sessions may not be enough. This applies to both psychosocial and empowerment-based approaches.
• Micro-skills teaching and learning using experiential methods in college-based modules need to be reinforced in subsequent practice.
• In both cases, the involvement of children, if well planned and supported, is likely to enhance learning and assessment.

The message for programme providers is that college-based and practice learning need to be explicitly linked if skilled communication is to be consolidated. This will be much easier to achieve if students are required to demonstrate effective engagements with children as part of practice learning and assessment. In this respect, there may be lessons for social work educators to learn from pre and post-registration training in more child-specialist professions such as teaching and paediatrics, where communication skills are often more explicitly taught and assessed.
4.6 In conclusion

This review provides a framework for social work programme providers to enable fresh thinking about both the structure and focus of the curriculum and about the most effective approach to teaching and assessment of students. The research and survey findings, on which the implications and messages for practice are based, are sufficiently robust to inform the direction of change in practice if not the specific methods to be employed in each case. They underpin the direction of change now required in the planning of a children’s services workforce. In this respect, it is important that programme development in this field is systematic rather than episodic.

As specific examples of effective methods of teaching and assessing communication become identified, they can be included generally in curriculum revisions. The review has demonstrated that these methods are only now emerging and that they have yet to be tested for effectiveness. It is equally important, in these circumstances, that new methods and approaches are formally evaluated as they are introduced.
References


references


References


References


References


Appendix 1

Search terms and databases

ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts)

Searched 8 April 2005

1 AB, TI=child*
2 AB, TI=infan*
3 AB, TI=adolescen*
4 AB, TI=teenage*
5 AB, TI=youth*
6 AB, TI=juvenile*
7 AB, TI=(young within 1 adult*)
8 AB, TI=(young within 1 person*)
9 AB, TI=(young within 1 people)
10 AB, TI=pupil*
11 AB, TI=berry
12 AB, TI=babie*
13 AB, TI=preschool*
14 AB, TI=toddler*
15 de=children
16 de=young people
17 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 or 9 or 10 or 11 or 12 or 13 or
14 or 15 or 16
18 AB, SO=(social within 1 work*)
19 AB, SO=(protection within 1 officer*)
20 AB, SO=(assessment within 1 framework)
21 AB, SO=(adoption within 1 work*)
22 AB, SO=(family within 1 placement*)
23 AB, SO=(youth within 1 justice)
24 AB, SO=CAFCASS
25 AB, SO=casework*
26 AB, SO=guardian*
27 AB, SO=(residential within 1 work*)
28 AB, SO=(social within 1 care)
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30 AB, SO=(care within 1 work*)
31 AB, SO=(mental within 1 health within 1 work*)
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33 AB, SO=(court within 1 welfare within 1 officer)
34 AB, SO=(youth within 1 work*)
35 AB, SO=(family within 1 cent* within 1 work*)
36 AB, SO=(sure within 1 start)
37 de=social workers
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39 de=social work
40 de=practice placements
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42 AB=(direct within 2 work*)
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46 AB=view*
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50 AB=disclos*
51 AB=(wish* within 2 feel*)
52 AB=(life within 1 stor*)
53 AB=(child* within 1 observ*)
54 AB=(infan* within 1 observ*)
55 AB=communicat*
56 AB=verbal*
57 AB=written
58 AB=convers*
59 AB=interact*
60 AB=interpersonal
61 AB=intersubjectiv*
62 AB=assistive
63 AB=augmentative
64 AB=talk*
Appendix 1

65  AB=tell*
66  AB=(giv* within 3 information)
67  AB=(face within 1 to)
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86 or 87 or 88 or 89 or 90 or 91 or 92 or 93 or 94 or 95 or 96 or
97 or 98 or 99 or 100 or 101 or 102 or 103
105 17 and 41 and 104

C2-SPECTR

Searched 20 April 2005
(communicat or consult or relationship or psychotherap or reflect or
talk or interview and child)

CareData

Searched 5 May 2005
TI, AB:
((child* / infan* / adolescen* / teenage* / youth* / juvenile* / (young
w1 adult*) / (young w1 person*) / (young w1 people) / pupil* / baby /
babie* / preschool* / toddler*)

and

((social w1 work*) / (protection w1 officer*) / (assessment w1 framework)
/ (adoption w1 work*) / (family w1 placement*) / (youth w1 justice) /
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w1 work*) / (social w1 care) / (youth w1 work*) / (care w1 work*) /
(mental health w1 work*) / CAMHS / (court welfare officer) / (family cent*
work*) / (sure w1 start))

and

((direct w2 work*) / narrative* / consult* / interview* / view* / mogp /
(achieving w3 evidence) / (memorandum w3 practice) / disclos* / (wish*
w2 feel*) / (life w1 stor*) / (child* w1 observ*) / (infan* w1 observ*) /
communicat* / verbal* / written / convers* / interact* / interpersonal /

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intersubjectiv* / assistive / augmentative / talk* / tell* / (giv* w3 infor-
mation) / (face w1 to) / counsel* / psychotherap* / storytell* / process / supervis* / (internal w1 world*) / intervention / relationship / therap* / practice / (child w1 centred) / (child w1 development) / skill* / reflect* / (voice w4 child*) / (second language) / attachment / drawing* / (cultural w1 needs) / (anti w1 oppressive) / empower* / belie* / convey* / video* / tape* / (family group conference*) / participat* / (life w1 history) / AAC / sign* / symbol* / psychodrama* / engag*)

Child Data

Searched 21 April 2005
(child* or infan* or adolescen* or young* or juvenile* or baby* or babie* or preschool*) AND ((social work*) or (assessment framework*) or (family placement*) or (youth justice) or (juvenile justice) or CAFCASS or casework* or guardian* or (social care) or (youth work) or (care work*) or (mental health work*) or CAMHS or (family cent*) or (sure start)) AND (narrative* or consult* or interview* or view* or disclos* or (life stor*) or (child observ*) or communicat* or verbal* or written or convers* or interact* or interpersonal or intersubjectiv* or assistive or augmentative or talk* or tell* or counsel* or psychotherap* or process or supervis* or intervention* or relationship or therap* or practice or (child development) or skill* or reflect* or attachment or (cultural needs) or empower* or video* or participat* or sign* or symbol* or engag*)

CINAHL

Searched 22 April 2005
limit set 238 YEAR > 1985

1    child$4
2    infan$2
3    adolescen$
4    teenage$
5    youth$
6    juvenile$
7    young ADJ adult$
| 8 | young ADJ person |
| 9 | young ADJ people |
| 10 | pupil$ |
| 11 | baby$ |
| 12 | babie$ |
| 13 | preschool$ |
| 14 | toddler$ |
| 15 | child.DE |
| 16 | adolescence.DE |
| 17 | (1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 or 9 or 10 or 11 or 12 or 13 or 14 or 15 or 16).AB. AND LG=EN |
| 18 | social ADJ work$3 |
| 19 | protection ADJ officer$ |
| 20 | assessment ADJ framework$ |
| 21 | adoption ADJ work$3 |
| 22 | family ADJ placement$ |
| 23 | youth ADJ justice |
| 24 | juvenile ADJ justice |
| 25 | CAFCASS |
| 26 | casework$ |
| 27 | guardian$ |
| 28 | residential ADJ work$3 |
| 29 | social ADJ care |
| 30 | youth ADJ work$3 |
| 31 | care ADJ work$3 |
| 32 | mental ADJ health ADJ work$3 |
| 33 | CAMHS |
| 34 | court ADJ welfare ADJ officer$ |
| 35 | family ADJ cent$3 |
| 36 | sure ADJ start |
| 37 | SOCIAL-WORK-PRACTICE.DE. |
| 38 | (18 or 19 or 20 or 21 or 22 or 23 or 24 or 25 or 26 or 27 or 28 or 29 or 30 or 31 or 32 or 33 or 34 or 35 or 36 or 37 or 38).AB. AND LG=EN |
| 39 | direct ADJ work$3 |
| 40 | narrative$ |
| 41 | consult$ |
| 42 | interview$ |
view$ 
mosp 
achieving NEAR2 evidence 
memorandum NEAR3 practice 
disclos$ 
wish$ NEAR feel$ 
life ADJ stor$3 
child ADJ observ$ 
infant ADJ observ$ 
communicat$ 
verbal$ 
written 
convers$ 
interact$ 
interpersonal 
intersubjectiv$ 
assistive 
augmentative 
talk$ 
tell$ 
giv$ ADJ information 
face ADJ to ADJ face 
counsel$ 
psychotherap$ 
storytell$ 
process 
supervis$ 
internal ADJ world$ 
tervention$ 
relationship$ 
therap$4 
practice 
child ADJ centred 
child ADJ development 
skill$ 
reflect$ 
voice NEAR child 
English NEAR second NEAR language
attachment
drawing$
cultural ADJ needs
anti ADJ oppressive
empower$
belie$
convey$
video$
tape$
family ADJ group ADJ conference
participat$
life ADJ history
AAC
sign$
symbol$
communication.DE
(39 or 40 or 41 or 42 or 43 or 44 or 45 or 46 or 47 or 48 or 49 or
50 or 51 or 52 or 53 or 54 or 55 or 56 or 57 or 58 or 59 or 60 or
61 or 62 or 63 or 64 or 65 or 66 or 67 or 68 or 69 or 70 or 71 or
72 or 73 or 74 or 75 or 76 or 77 or 78 or 79 or 80 or 81 or 82 or
83 or 84 or 85 or 86 or 87 or 88 or 89 or 90 or 91 or 92 or 93 or
94 or 95 or 96).AB. AND LG=EN
17 and 38 and 97

Dissertation Abstracts

Searched 16 May 2005
(child* or infan* or adolescen* or teenage* or youth* or juvenile* or
(young within 1 adult*) or (young within 1 person*) or (young within 1
people) or pupil* or baby or babie* or preschool* or toddler*) and (((direct
within 2 work*) or narrative* or consult* or interview* or view* or mogp
or (achieving within 3 evidence) or (memorandum within 3 practice) or
disclos* or (wish* within 2 feel*) or (life within 1 stor*) or (child* within
1 observ*) or (infan* within 1 observ*) or communicat* or verbal* or
written or convers* or interact* or interpersonal or intersubjectiv* or
assistive or augmentative or talk* or tell* or (giv* within 3 informa-
ton) or (face within 1 to) or counsel* or psychotherap* or storytell*
or process or supervis* or (internal within 1 world*) or intervention or relationship or therap* or practice or (child within 1 centred) or (child within 1 development) or skill* or reflect* or (voice within 4 child*) or attachment or drawing* or (cultural within 1 needs) or (anti within 1 oppressive) or empower* or belie* or convey* or video* or tape* or (family within 1 group within 1 conference*) or participat* or (life within 1 history) or AAC or sign* or symbol* or psychodrama* or engag*) and ((social within 1 work*) or (protection within 1 officer*) or (assessment within 1 framework) or (adoption within 1 work*) or (family within 1 placement*) or (youth within 1 justice) or (juvenile within 1 justice) or CAFCASS or casework* or guardian* or (residential within 1 work*) or (social within 1 care) or (youth within 1 work*) or (care within 1 work*) or (mental within 1 health within 1 work*) or CAMHS or (court within 1 welfare within 1 officer) or (youth within 1 work*) or (sure within 1 start)))

DHZZ

Searched 22 April 2005
1  child$4
2  infan$2
3  adolescen$
4  teenage$
5  youth$
6  juvenile$
7  young ADJ adult$
8  young ADJ person
9  young ADJ people
10  pupil$
11  baby$
12  babie$
13  preschool$
14  toddler$
15  (children.DE.)
16  (young-people.DE.)
17  1 OR 2 OR 3 OR 4 OR 5 OR 6 OR 7 OR 8 OR 9 OR 10 OR 11 OR 12 OR 13 OR 14 OR 15 OR 16
54 verbal$
55 written
56 convers$
57 interact$
58 interpersonal
59 intersubjectiv$
60 assistive
61 augmentative
62 talk$
63 tell$
64 give$ ADJ information
65 face ADJ to ADJ face
66 counsel$
67 psychotherap$
68 storytell$
69 process
70 supervise$
71 internal ADJ world$
72 intervention$
73 relationship$
74 therap$4
75 practice
76 child ADJ centred
77 child ADJ development
78 skill$
79 reflect$
80 voice NEAR child
81 English NEAR second NEAR language
82 attachment
83 drawing$
84 cultural ADJ needs
85 anti ADJ oppressive
86 empower$
87 belie$
88 convey$
89 video$
90 tape$
91 family ADJ group ADJ conference
92 participat$
93 life ADJ history
94 AAC
95 sign$
96 symbol$
97 (Communication.DE.)
98 40 OR 41 OR 42 OR 43 OR 44 OR 45 OR 46 OR 47 OR 48
OR 49 OR 50 OR 51 OR 52 OR 53 OR 54 OR 55 OR 56 OR 57
OR 58 OR 59 OR 60 OR 61 OR 62 OR 63 OR 64 OR 65 OR
66 OR 67 OR 68 OR 69 OR 70 OR 71 OR 72 OR 73 OR 74 OR
75 OR 76 OR 77 OR 78 OR 79 OR 80 OR 81 OR 82 OR 83 OR
84 OR 85 OR 86 OR 87 OR 88 OR 89 OR 90 OR 91 OR 92 OR
93 OR 94 OR 95 OR 96 OR 97
99 (17 AND 39 AND 98) AND LG=EN

ERIC/BEI

**Searched 21 April 2005**

((kw: child* OR kw: infan* OR kw: adolescen* OR kw: teenage* OR
kw: youth* OR kw: juvenile* OR kw: young w adult* OR kw: young
w person* OR kw: young w people OR kw: pupil* OR kw: baby OR
dkw: babie* OR kw: preschool* OR kw: toddler*)) and ((kw: social w
worke* OR kw: protection w officer* OR kw: assessment w framework
OR kw: adoption w worke* OR kw: family w placement* OR kw: youth
w justice OR kw: CAFCASS OR kw: casework* OR kw: guardian* OR
kw: residential w worke* OR kw: youth w worke* OR kw: care w worke*
OR kw: mental w health w worke* OR kw: CAMHS OR kw: court w
welfare w officer OR kw: family w centr* w worke* OR kw: sure w start
OR kw: social w care OR kw: practice w placements OR kw: protection
w officer* OR kw: juvenile w justice OR kw: litem)) and ((kw: direct
w work OR kw: narrative OR kw: consult+ OR kw: consultation OR
kw: interview* OR kw: view+ OR kw: mosp OR kw: achieving w2
evidence OR kw: memorandum w3 practice OR kw: disclos* OR kw:
wish+ w2 feeling+ OR kw: life w story OR kw: child* w observ* OR
kw: infan* w observ* OR kw: communicat* OR kw: verbal* OR kw:
written OR kw: convers* OR kw: interact* OR kw: interpersonal OR
kw: intersubjectiv* OR kw: assistive OR kw: augmentative OR kw:
talk+ OR kw: talking OR kw: tell+ OR kw: telling OR kw: information OR kw: face w “to” OR kw: counsel* OR kw: psychotherap* OR kw: storytell* OR kw: process OR kw: supervis* OR kw: internal w world* OR kw: intervention OR kw: relationship OR kw: therap* OR kw: practice OR kw: child w centred OR kw: child w development OR kw: skill+ OR kw: reflect* OR kw: voice OR kw: second w language OR kw: attachment OR kw: drawing* OR kw: cultural w needs OR kw: anti w oppressive OR kw: empower* OR kw: belie* OR kw: convey* OR kw: video* OR kw: tape+ OR kw: family w group w conference* OR kw: participat* OR kw: life w history OR kw: AAC OR kw: sign* OR kw: symbol* OR kw: psychodrama* OR kw: engag* OR kw: disclosure OR kw: engagement OR kw: communication w skill+ OR kw: listen*))


KFND

Searched 22 April 2005
1 child$4
2 infan$2
3 adolescen$
4 teenage$
5 youth$
6 juvenile$
7 young ADJ adult$
8 young ADJ person
9 young ADJ people
10 pupil$
11 baby$
12 babie$
13 preschool$
14 toddler$
15 (children.DE.)
16 (young-people.DE.)
17 1 OR 2 OR 3 OR 4 OR 5 OR 6 OR 7 OR 8 OR 9 OR 10 OR 11 OR 12 OR 13 OR 14 OR 15 OR 16
18 social ADJ work$3
19 protection ADJ officer$
20 assessment ADJ framework$
21 adoption ADJ work$3
22 family ADJ placement$
23 youth ADJ justice
24 juvenile ADJ justice
25 CAFCASS
26 casework$
27 guardian$
28 residential ADJ work$3
29 social ADJ care
30 youth ADJ work$3
31 care ADJ work$3
32 mental ADJ health ADJ work$3
33 CAMHS
34 court ADJ welfare ADJ officer$
35 family ADJ cent$3
36 sure ADJ start
37 (children-in-care.DE.)
38 (social-care.DE.)
39 18 OR 19 OR 20 OR 21 OR 22 OR 23 OR 24 OR 25 OR 26 OR 27 OR 28 OR 29 OR 30 OR 31 OR 32 OR 33 OR 34 OR 35 OR 36 OR 37 OR 38
40 direct ADJ work$3
41 narrative$
42 consult$
43 interview$
44 view$
45 mogp
46 achieving ADJ evidence
47 memorandum NEAR3 practice
48 disclos$
49 wish$ NEAR feel$
50 life ADJ stor$3
51 child ADJ observ$
52 infant ADJ observ$
53 communicat$
54 verbal$
55 written
conversational
interpersonal
intersubjective
assistive
augmentative
talk
tell
give ADJ information
face ADJ to ADJ face
counsel
psychotherapy
storytelling
process
supervision
internal ADJ world
intervention
relationship
therapy
practice
child ADJ centred
child ADJ development
skill
reflection
voice NEAR child
English NEAR second NEAR language
attachment
drawing
Cultural ADJ needs
anti ADJ oppressive
empower
belief
convey
video
tape
family ADJ group ADJ conference
participation
life ADJ history
(child* OR infan* OR adolescen* OR teenage* OR youth* OR juvenile* OR young adult* OR young person* OR young people OR baby OR babie* OR preschool*) AND ((social work*) OR (protection officer*) OR (assessment framework) OR (adoption work*) OR (family placement*) OR (youth justice) OR (casework*) OR (guardian*) OR (youth work*) OR (mental health work*) OR (CAMHS) OR (court welfare officer) OR (care work*) OR (social care) OR (protection officer*) OR (juvenile justice) ) AND (communicat* or interpersonal or therap* or sign* or symbol* or verbal* or written or participat* or disclos* or talk* or interview* or skill* or empower* or view* or process or relationship or intervention* or supervis* or reflect* or attachment or (life stor*) or psychotherap* or tell* or counsel* or (child development) or (child observ*))
Medline

Searched 15 April 2005
ln="english"
1 child*
2 infant*
3 adolescent*
4 teenage*
5 youth*
6 juvenile*
7 young w1 adult*
8 young w1 person*
9 young w1 people
10 pupil*
11 baby
12 baby*
13 preschool*
14 toddler*
15 su="child"
16 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 or 9 or 10 or 11 or 12 or 13 or 14 or 15
17 social w1 work
18 protection w1 officer*
19 assessment w1 framework*
20 adoption w1 work*
21 family w1 placement*
22 youth w1 justice
23 juvenile w1 justice
24 CAFCASS
25 casework*
26 guardian*
27 residential w1 work*
28 social w1 care
29 youth w1 work*
30 care w1 work*
31 mental w1 health w1 work*
32 CAMHS
33 court w1 welfare w1 officer*
sure start
litem*
su=“social work”
17 or 18 or 19 or 20 or 21 or 22 or 23 or 24 or 25 or 26 or 27 or 28 or 29 or 30 or 31 or 32 or 33 or 34 or 35 or 36
child w1 development
skill*
reflect*
voice w4 child*
english w2 second w2 language
attachment*
drawing*
cultural w1 needs
anti w1 oppressive
anti-oppressive
empower*
belic*
convey*
video*
tape*
family w1 group w1 conference*
participat*
life w1 history
AAC
symbol*
psychodrama*
engag*
direct w2 work*
narrative*
interview*
mogp
achieving w3 evidence
memorandum w3 practice
disclos*
wish* w2 feel*
life w1 stor*
child w1 observ*
infan* w1 observ*
71 communicat*
72 verbal*
73 written
74 convers*
75 interpersonal
76 intersubjectiv*
77 assistive
78 augmentative
79 talk*
80 tell*
81 giv* w3 information
82 face w2 face
83 counsel*
84 psychotherap*
85 storytell*
86 supervis*
87 internal w1 world
88 relationship*
89 child w1 centred
90 child w1 centered
91 su=”communication”
92 su=”psychotherapy”
93 38 or 39 or 40 or 41 or 42 or 43 or 44 or 45 or 46 or 47 or 48 or 49 or 50 or 51 or 52 or 53 or 54 or 55 or 56 or 57 or 58 or 59 or 60 or 61 or 62 or 63 or 64 or 65 or 66 or 67 or 68 or 69 or 70 or 71 or 72 or 73 or 74 or 75 or 76 or 77 or 78 or 79 or 80 or 81 or 82 or 83 or 84 or 85 or 86 or 87 or 88 or 89 or 90 or 91 or 92
94 16 and 37 and 93

Psycinfo

Searched 14 April 2005
1 child*
2 infan*
3 adolescen*
4 teenage*
5 youth*
42 reflect*
43 voice near4 child*
44 english near2 second near2 language
45 attachment*
46 drawing*
47 cultural w1 needs
48 anti w1 oppressive
49 anti-oppressive
50 empower*
51 belie*
52 convey*
53 video*
54 tape*
55 family adj group adj conference*
56 participat*
57 life adj history
58 AAC
59 symbol*
60 psychodrama*
61 engag*
62 direct near2 work*
63 narrative*
64 interview*
65 mogp
66 achieving near3 evidence
67 memorandum near3 practice
68 disclos*
69 wish* near2 feel*
70 life adj stor*
71 child adj observ*
72 infan* adj observ*
73 communicat*
74 verbal*
75 written
76 convers*
77 interpersonal
78 intersubjectiv*
79 assistive
augmentative
talk*
tell*
giv* near3 information
counsel*
psychotherap*
storytell*
supervis*
internal adj world
relationship*
child adj centred
MJ=Interpersonal-Interaction
MJ=Communication-
MJ=Written-Communication
MJ=Music-Therapy
MJ=Play-Therapy
MJ=Counseling-
40 or 41 or 42 or 43 or 44 or 45 or 46 or 47 or 48 or 49 or 50 or
51 or 52 or 53 or 54 or 55 or 56 or 57 or 58 or 59 or 60 or 61 or
62 or 63 or 64 or 65 or 66 or 67 or 68 or 69 or 70 or 71 or 72 or
73 or 74 or 75 or 76 or 77 or 78 or 79 or 80 or 81 or 82 or 83 or
84 or 85 or 86 or 87 or 88 or 89 or 90 or 91 or 92 or 93 or 94 or
95 or 96
17 and 39 and 97 and ((AG:PSYI=ADOLESCENCE) or (AG:
PSYI=BIRTH-1-MO) or (AG:PSYI=BIRTH-12-YRS) or (AG:
PSYI=CHILDHOOD) or (AG:PSYI=INFANCY) or (AG:
PSYI=NEONATAL) or (AG:PSYI=PRESCHOOL-AGE) or
(AG:PSYI=SCHOOL-AGE) or (AG:PSYI=13-17-YRS) or (AG:
PSYI=2-23-MO) or (AG:PSYI=2-5-YRS) or (AG:PSYI=6-12-
YRS)) and (LA:PSYI=ENGLISH)

SIGLE (System for Information on Grey Literature)

Searched 21 April 2005
(child* or infan* or adolescen* or teenage* or youth* or juvenile* or
(young adj person) or (young adj people) or (young adj adult*) or pupil*
or baby* or babie* or preschool* or toddler*) and ((social adj work*) or
(protection adj officer*) or (assessment adj framework) or (adoption adj work*) or (family adj placement*) or (youth adj justice) or (juvenile adj justice) or CAFCASS or casework* or guardian* or (residential adj work*) or (social adj care) or (youth adj work*) or (care adj work*) or (mental adj health adj work*) or CAMHS or (court adj welfare adj officer*) or (family adj cent* adj work*) or (sure adj start) and ((direct near2 work*) or narrative* or consult* or interview* or view* or mogp or (achieving near3 evidence) or (memorandum near3 practice) or disclos* or (wish* near2 feel*) or (life adj stor*) or (child adj observ*) or (infan* adj observ*) or communicat* or verbal* or written or convers* or interact* or interpersonal or intersubjectiv* or assistive or augmentative or talk* or tell* or (giv* near3 information) or counsel* or psychotherap* or storytell* or process or supervis* or (internal adj world*) or intervention or relationship or therap* or practice or (child adj centred) or (child adj development) or skill* or reflect* or (voice near4 child*) or (english near2 second near2 language) or attachment or drawing* or (cultural adj needs) or (anti adj oppressive) or empower* or belie* or convey* or video* or tape* or (family adj group adj conference*) or participat* or (life adj history) or AAC or symbol* or psychodrama* or engag*)

Social Services Abstracts

Searched 21 April 2005

1 child*
2 infan*
3 adolescen*
4 teenage*
5 youth*
6 juvenile*
7 young within 1 adult*
8 young within 1 person
9 young within 1 people
10 pupil*
11 baby*
12 babie*
13 preschool*
14 toddler*
DE=Childhood
De=Youth
1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 or 9 or 10 or 11 or 12 or 13 or 14 or 15 or 16
social within 1 work*
protection within 1 officer*
assessment within 1 framework*
adoption within 1 work*
family within 1 placement*
youth within 1 justice
juvenile within 1 justice
CAFCASS
casework*
guardian*
residential within 1 work*
social within 1 care*
youth within 1 work*
care within 1 work*
mental within 1 health within 1 work*
CAMHS
court within 1 welfare within 1 officer*
family within 1 cent* within 1 work*
sure within 1 start
DE=Social Work
18 or 19 or 20 or 21 or 22 or 23 or 24 or 25 or 26 or 27 or 28 or 29 or 30 or 31 or 32 or 33 or 34 or 35 or 36 or 37
direct within 2 work*
narrative*
consult*
view*
mogp
achieving within 3 evidence
memorandum within 3 practice
disclos*
wish* within 2 feel*
life within 1 stor*
child within 1 observ*
infan* within 1 observ*
Appendix 1

51 communicat*
52 verbal*
53 written
54 convers*
55 interact*
56 interpersonal
57 intersubjectiv*
58 assistive
59 augmentative
60 talk*
61 tell*
62 giv* within 3 information
63 face within 1 to
64 counsel*
65 psychotherap*
66 storytell*
67 supervis*
68 internal within 1 world*
69 relationship*
70 child within 1 centred
71 child within 1 development
72 voice within 4 child*
73 english within 2 second within 2 language
74 attachment*
75 cultural within 1 needs
76 anti within 1 oppressive
77 empower*
78 convey*
79 video*
80 tape*
81 family within 1 group within 1 conference
82 life within 1 history
83 AAC
84 symbol*
85 psychodrama*
86 engag*
87 family within 1 therap*
88 art within 1 therap*
89 drama within 1 therap*
90 music within 1 therap*
91 play within 1 therap*
92 dance within 1 therap*
93 creative within 1 therap*
94 expressive within 1 therap*
95 filial within 1 therap*
96 DE=Interpersonal Communication
97 DE=Nonverbal Communication
98 DE=Verbal Communication
99 39 or 40 or 41 or 42 or 43 or 44 or 45 or 46 or 47 or 48 or 49 or 50 or 51 or 52 or 53 or 54 or 55 or 56 or 57 or 58 or 59 or 60 or 61 or 62 or 63 or 64 or 65 or 66 or 67 or 68 or 69 or 70 or 71 or 72 or 73 or 74 or 75 or 76 or 77 or 78 or 79 or 80 or 81 or 82 or 83 or 84 or 85 or 86 or 87 or 88 or 89 or 90 or 91 or 92 or 93 or 94 or 95 or 96 or 97 or 98
100 17 and 38 and 99

Social Work Abstracts

Searched 21 April 2005
1 child*
2 infan*
3 adolescen*
4 teenage*
5 youth*
6 juvenile*
7 young adj person
8 young adj people
9 young adj adult*
10 pupil*
11 baby*
12 babie*
13 preschool*
14 toddler*
15 (Adolescents-) in DE
16 (Children-) in DE
17 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 or 7 or 8 or 9 or 10 or 11 or 12 or 13 or 14 or 15 or 16
18 social adj work*
19 protection adj officer*
20 assessment adj framework
21 adoption adj work*
22 family adj placement*
23 youth adj justice
24 juvenile adj justice
25 CAFCASS
26 casework*
27 guardian*
28 residential adj work*
29 social adj care
30 youth adj work*
31 care adj work*
32 mental adj health adj work*
33 CAMHS
34 court adj welfare adj officer*
35 family adj cent* adj work*
36 sure adj start
37 (Social-work) in DE
38 18 or 19 or 20 or 21 or 22 or 23 or 24 or 25 or 26 or 27 or 28 or 29 or 30 or 31 or 32 or 33 or 34 or 35 or 36 or 37
39 direct near2 work*
40 narrative*
41 consult*
42 view*
43 mogp
44 achieving near3 evidence
45 memorandum near3 practice
46 disclos*
47 wish* near2 feel*
48 life adj stor*
49 child adj observ*
50 infan* adj observ*
51 verbal*
52 communicat*
written
counsel*
psychotherap*
storytell*
supervis*
internal adj world*
relationship
therap*
practice
child adj centred
child adj development
reflect*
voice near4 child*
english near2 second near2 language
attachment
drawing*
cultural adj needs
anti adj oppressive
empower*
belie*
convey*
video*
tape*
family adj group adj conference*
participat*
life adj history
AAC
symbol*
engag*
psychodrama*
91  (Group-therapy) in DE
92  (Music-therapy) in DE
93  (Direct-practice) in DE
94  39 or 40 or 41 or 42 or 43 or 44 or 45 or 46 or 47 or 48 or 49 or
50 or 51 or 52 or 53 or 54 or 55 or 56 or 57 or 58 or 59 or 60 or
61 or 62 or 63 or 64 or 65 or 66 or 67 or 68 or 69 or 70 or 71 or
72 or 73 or 74 or 75 or 76 or 77 or 78 or 79 or 80 or 81 or 82 or
83 or 84 or 85 or 86 or 87 or 88 or 89 or 90 or 91 or 92 or 93
95  17 and 38 and 94
Appendix 2

Screening and selection process
The table opposite shows the number of citations obtained by the search strategies given in Appendix 1:

• before any screening took place
• after initial screening took place
• the number of citations duplicated between databases
• the number of unique citations obtained from each database.
Table 1
Numbers of citations resulting from search strategy by database

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Database</th>
<th>Total citations retrieved by search strategy*</th>
<th>Total citations included after screening*</th>
<th>Duplicated citations appearing in each database*</th>
<th>Unique citations appearing in each database</th>
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<td>158</td>
<td>58</td>
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<td>26</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Child Data</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>3,933</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>76</td>
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<td>27,539</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>361</td>
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Note: * These figures have not been filtered to take duplicates into account.
### Appendix 3

**Keywording strategy**

<p>| Authors                        | ............................................................................................................ |
|-------------------------------|............................................................................................................ |
| Title                         | ............................................................................................................ |
| Year of publication           | ............................................................................................................ |
| Linked to other reports       | Y/N |
| (please select one)           | |
| How identified                | Citation |
| (select one)                  | Contact |
|                               | Electronic database |
|                               | Unknown |
| Status                        | Published |
| (select one)                  | In press |
|                               | Unpublished |
| Location of study             | UK |
| (select one)                  | North America |
|                               | Europe |
|                               | Australia/New Zealand |
|                               | Israel |
|                               | Africa |
|                               | Asia |
|                               | Other: Americas |
|                               | Other: Pacific |
| Type of study                 | Empirical |
| (select one)                  | Conceptual |
|                               | Practice guidelines |
|                               | More than one |
|                               | Other |</p>
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<td>Book chapter</td>
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<td>Conference proceedings</td>
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<td>Policy document</td>
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<td>Dissertation</td>
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<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice/education?</th>
<th>Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(select one)</td>
<td>Practice</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settings for professional practice</th>
<th>Children in residential care</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(select one)</td>
<td>Fostered children</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All looked-after children</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Child protection in the community</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Children in the community</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clinical/therapeutic contexts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Youth offending</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose of communication</th>
<th>Involving child for the purposes of decision making, planning and delivery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(select one)</td>
<td>Facilitating change in child’s feelings, behaviour or relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional engagement/relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than one</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features of communication</th>
<th>Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(select one)</td>
<td>Core conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Underpinning knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than one</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of communication (select one)</td>
<td>Verbal</td>
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<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Written</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressive/artistic</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Assistive/augmentative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Technology</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Non-verbal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>More than one (please specify)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not specified</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suitable for data extraction (select one)</td>
<td>Y/N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 4

Practice survey questionnaire: social work educators

April 20 2005

Communicating with Children and Young People (CYP): Teaching, Learning and Assessing

Communication Skills in Social Work (SW) Education
A knowledge review for the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

About the questionnaire*
Please find below the information we have about those courses, modules or study units that touch on skills in communication with children and young people, on the qualifying SW programme(s) provided by your institution.

We would like you to insert missing information or correct errors in our information. It should take no longer than 30 minutes to read through and complete.

We would also be delighted to receive any other documentation that we do not already have: for example copies of course/module handbooks or outlines as appropriate, including practice learning handbooks.

Thank you once again for taking the time to participate in this research at a time when the development of this area of the SW curriculum is so high on the professional agenda. Your contribution is greatly appreciated.

Contact information
Helpful tips

Sharon Otoo
Research Assistant
Triangle, Unit E1, The Knoll Business Centre, Old Shoreham Road, Hove BN3 7GS
* We will complete the questionnaire with you by ‘phone if you prefer. Please email sharon@triangle-services.co.uk with dates.

* We recommend that you read the attached document ‘About our research: Information for course convenors’ for more details about the information we would like from you.

April 20 2005
Section A: Confirming basic programme information

Your name:

Your institution:

Names of other programme convenors completing this questionnaire:

Name(s) of programme(s) provided: Level and length of programme:
programme convenor:

1.
2.
3.
4.

Section B: Your programme(s): taught courses/modules in the university/college

About Section B

Helpful tips

This section is about teaching and assessing communication skills on your taught courses/modules based in the university/college.

We need to know what is taught about communication skills with children and young people whether or not learning takes place as part of a generic course/module on communication or in a specific course/module on children and young people

Please complete course/module details for each programme you offer.
April 20 2005
Programme B1: Course/module title and level of study

Is this course compulsory or optional?

Is there a generic approach to teaching and assessing communication or is it specific to practice with children and young people?

What are the total contact hours and study time?

What are the aims of this course/module? (Please attach the course outline as necessary)

Which aspects of communication skills are taught/learnt (see below)?

- those to do with general capability/skill (eg respect, listening, empathy, summarising, explaining, consulting, negotiating)
- those to do with specific child-centred techniques and approaches (eg play, geneograms)
- those to do with specific social work roles and practice contexts (eg ‘life story work’ with adopted children, ‘wishes and feelings’ work with children in court)
- other (please use your own categories if the ones we have chosen are not helpful)

What methods of teaching/learning are used? (Please describe briefly where relevant next to categories below):

Being observant (eg child observation)

Talking and telling (eg lecture, seminar, directed reading)

Showing and practising (eg video to show or practice skills)

Sharing personal experience of childhood (eg using own geneogram)

Who contributes to the teaching on this programme (eg staff, practitioners, children and young people)?
What aspects of communication skills are assessed? (Please describe the learning outcomes and assessment task)

Who contributes to the assessment (eg staff, practitioners, children and young people)?

April 20 2005
Section C: Practice learning and assessment

About Section C

This section is about teaching and assessing communication skills on the practice placements your students undertake.

We need to know what is taught about communication skills with children and young people in practice learning settings across the 200 days.

Please complete practice learning details for each programme you offer.

Please attach/send a copy of the relevant practice learning handbook and other documents if possible.

Programme C1: Practice placement

Do all students have the opportunity to undertake direct practice with children and young people during the 200 days. If so how?

Are students enabled to specialise in practice with children and young people in the final year(s) of the programme. If so how?

Does the placement contract/practice agreement specifically require the assessment of communication skills with children and young people in any placement (if so what is specified)?

How is learning on taught courses (as described in Section B) linked to learning in practice in each placement (please explain in brief)
Does any aspect of the 200-day practice learning sequence on the programme require students to experience a multidisciplinary, interprofessional approach to communication with children and young people? (if yes, please describe)

April 20 2005
What types of evidence are students required to provide to demonstrate their achievement of the communication skills described in the National Occupational Standards for social work (key roles 1–4)?

What role do work-based assessors/practice teachers have in the assessment of this evidence of skill in communication with children and young people?

What role do the children and young people who have received a service from the student play in the assessment of this evidence?

Section D: Other comments

We are interested in innovative and effective practice. Is there anything you would particularly like to draw to our attention?

What, if any, obstacles do you experience in delivering this aspect of the curriculum? Please use the space provided below.

We are grateful for your assistance with this research and thank you for your time and your support.

We will be in touch again in due course to inform you of the initial findings of the research.

Best wishes
Sharon Otoo, Research Assistant
Barry Luckock, Project Coordinator
Appendix 5

List of professional bodies contacted for secondary survey

Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP) (analytic)
Association of Educational Psychologists
Association of Family Therapists
Association of Professional Music Therapists
British Association of Art Therapists
British Association of Counselling
British Association of Drama Therapists
British Association of Play Therapists
British Psychological Society, Children’s Division (child psychologists)
Centrex Police Training Section
Chartered Society of Physiotherapists
College of Occupational Therapists
Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and QCA (teachers)
Express Advocacy (advocates)
National Network of Playwork Education and Training
Nursing and Midwifery Council
Royal College of Nurses (nurses, health visitors, nursery nurses)
Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists
Royal Society of Medicine
UKCP Integrative Child Psychotherapists
## Appendices

### Appendix 6

**Allied professionals: interview format**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Intro to overall project – review of pre-qualification social work training for SCIE looking at teaching, learning and assessing communication skills. Identifying areas of good practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Explanation: as part of the knowledge review we are looking at how social workers get taught to communicate with children. Alongside this we are contacting other professional groups to see how (doctors, etc, etc) are taught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Can you tell me how communicating with children is taught in your professional training? How is teaching/learning communication skills divided between practice placements and taught courses at college? How do educators on generic professional programmes ensure the specific focus on skills re children and young people is maintained?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Are you aware of any particular innovative approaches being used within education providers for your profession? Please describe them. Can we have contact details?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>What kind of approaches are used to develop individual skills in this area?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Who contributes to this teaching (eg staff, practitioners, children or young people themselves)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Have these innovative methods been written up or evaluated? If yes, can we please see a copy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>What types of evidence are students required to provide to demonstrate their achievement of communication skills with children and young people?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 7

Summary of social work practice in-depth review studies and data extraction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>‘To gain an overall evaluation of the professional response to child sexual abuse, from the perspective of children who had suffered abuse, and their current carers’ (p 132).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Intervention does not form part of this research study – it is an evaluation of an aspect of a previously occurring natural intervention (that is, child’s referral to professional services following alleged sexual abuse).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>Qualitative (semi-structured) interview study of 35 children who received social work input following reporting of sexual abuse, and of their carers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and conclusions</td>
<td>Listening and talking with the social worker was seen as fundamental and valued by the children to provide emotional support and reassurance, particularly if the child was facing a difficult circumstance such as a move or impending court appearance. Providing honest information and explanation was valued as a way of helping children deal with difficult matters. Life story work increased their understanding. The importance of honesty was stressed. Children wanted information and explanation to be given in age-appropriate language. The children were sensitive to the social worker’s attitude, demeanor, personal qualities and level of engagement in the relationship; this either established trust or made them scared. Accessibility and continuity of worker over time was important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>To explore the assessment process as set out in the assessment framework and consider whether the assessment records facilitate assessments that consider the child’s developmental needs, parenting capacity, and family and environmental factors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>The social worker's assessment of the child – a naturally occurring intervention – is explored. There is no comparison intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>The relevant part of the study consisted of retrospective interviews with children on their experience of being assessed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and conclusions</td>
<td>Social workers have not been as successful at involving children in assessment as they have with parents. ‘Social work practice continues to exclude children from fully participating in decisions that are likely to affect them’ (p 248): 25% remembered the social worker talking to them about the assessment process and the reason for it; 50% felt that the social worker had involved them in the assessment process. Young people thought social work assessments would improve if social workers: • ‘listened to and respected their views and experiences • believed what they said • explained what was going on during the assessment • talked to the people they thought were important • gave them something that would remind them of what had happened and what was likely to happen in the future’ (p 96).</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Aims of the study**               | • Develop understanding of how guardian ad litem service was operating  
                                         • Look at contribution made by guardians during proceeding  
                                         • Investigate relationship between guardians and children’s solicitors  
                                         • Examine children’s understanding of the role of the guardian. |
<p>| <strong>Intervention</strong>                    | Naturally occurring intervention: role of guardians with children involved in proceedings under the Children Act. |
| <strong>Study design</strong>                    | Qualitative study using questionnaires to professionals (social workers, solicitors, guardians) and interviews of children. |
| <strong>Findings and conclusions</strong>        | Children found the guardian reassuring; most felt listened to and that the guardian represented their interests in court. Seventy-one per cent identified ‘ability to listen’ as most important attribute of guardians. The guardian had given explanations and shared information. Despite this, only half of the children understood the guardian's role. There were no differences in understanding between those receiving and not receiving leaflets; 43% identified ability to explain things as second most important attribute. Children's criticisms of guardians included not seeming interested, not getting things done, not keeping promises. Most children knew guardian had duty to inform court of their wishes and feelings, but only a few knew that there was a written report of this. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>McLeod, A. (2000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>‘How effectively do social workers listen to children looked after by the local authority? ’&lt;br&gt;‘What are the barriers to effective social worker–child communication? ’&lt;br&gt;‘How can children’s voices be heard more clearly?’ (p 6).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>Qualitative interview study with data derived from interviews with children and social workers, combined with quantitative data derived from casework files.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and conclusions</td>
<td>Children and social workers differed strikingly in their reports. Social workers reported that they made considerable efforts to communicate with children and young people, yet the children and young people themselves felt that social workers made little effort to communicate with them. There appeared to be a qualitative difference between the way children and adults used the term ‘listening’. The children judged whether someone was listening to what they said by how they acted in response – in particular, whether they carried out their wishes: listening as action. Social workers saw listening as attitude or a form of therapy, believing that they demonstrated listening simply by being there for the child, hearing them and empathising. In particular, they stressed tuning in to the unspoken undercurrents of emotion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>Can the participation of homeless adolescents – that is, involving them in shared decision making – help to improve the quality of professional care?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>None – descriptive study of young homeless experiences, problems and solutions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>Descriptive: interviews with homeless young people, and group discussion with selected samples of homeless young people, social workers and policy makers. Method of ‘peer research’: homeless young people recruited to conduct interviews with peers and participate in discussion groups.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Findings and conclusions | • Many homeless young people feel need for improved communication and cooperation with social workers – most feel ‘not listened to’ enough  
• Most significant components of this problem were: lack of communication, mutual lack of trust, lack of consultation on important decisions in the social care process and on institutional rules that apply, and red tape  
• More discussion needed re nature of their difficulties and potential solutions; a more mutual approach builds trust  
• Improved personal – rather than just professional – relationship between social worker and young person is necessary to improve young person's experiences of adults. This necessitates informal personal contact, emotional support and humour and management of the tension of young people's conflicting needs for more support and desire for less interference and more independence  
• Young people need to be given greater say in what happens to them – consultation, clarification of rules and boundaries, and shared contribution to decision making. |
<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>To understand what service users think about their therapeutic experiences and how similarities and differences parents and teenagers affect the way services is perceived and received.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>No manipulated research intervention but a descriptive study. Users are currently receiving child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) – no comparison group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>Descriptive, qualitative study of the experiences of intervention of service users (young people and parents). No evaluation as such.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and conclusions</td>
<td>Core therapeutic values and skills are central to establishment of a therapeutic alliance, using person-centred (eg empathetic, available, responsive, listening, non-judgemental, showing genuine concern, openness, trustworthiness and respect) and empowerment approaches (inclusiveness/user participation). These are more important than the particular therapeutic approach. Young people strongly wanted to be included/actively participate in the intervention. They did not always want their parents to be involved, but parents did want this. Issues of confidentiality were raised through this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Bell, M. (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>To explore children’s experiences of the child protection process, the degree to which they felt involved and what helped or hindered this in order to improve the service offered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>Qualitative study using a single data source – semi-structured interviews with 27 children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and conclusions</td>
<td>Many of the children had positive views of their social workers but did not always feel engaged or involved in the decision-making process. For example, participation in meetings was not ideal as they were intimidated by size, formality, etc and were not convinced that they could influence the decision. Children’s responses to professionals’ capacity to engage during the inquiry process are an important aspect of the assessment that tends to be ignored. Social workers need to model an interaction with each individual child that is supportive, companionable and constant. Bureaucratic structures need to be tailored to enable individual children’s voices to be heard – both in the ways that services and procedures are organised and in the use of relationships. Narrative accounts illustrate how child protection enquiries are adult focused – need to ground theory, practice and language in the world of the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Francis, J. (2002)</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aims of the study</strong></td>
<td>Insights into the views and perceptions of looked-after children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention</strong></td>
<td>Feedback on how materials for looked-after children were implemented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study design</strong></td>
<td>An informal consultation exercise with 20 young people in Scotland on the implementation of the looked-after children materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Findings and conclusions</strong></td>
<td>Children gave positive feedback on the looked-after children materials but expressed concern about the time taken to fill out the forms. They welcomed the implication that more time would be spent gathering accurate info on their lives. Some young people suggested that questions were quite 'social worky', highlighting the need to ensure that workers communicate effectively with them and check out the meaning attributed to questions. There is a need for training on communication and direct work with children and young people, particularly in relation to sensitive topics. There is also a need to ensure that young people are sufficiently informed to enable them to understand the philosophy and aims of the system and thereby obtain their consent and full participation in the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Munro, E. (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>To ascertain from children their views on being looked after and the degree of power that they felt they had to influence decisions made about them. This was commissioned by a local authority wanting to review its own practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>No intervention as such; reflections on current provision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>Qualitative study interviewing 15 children using unstructured interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and conclusions</td>
<td>Children were able and willing to articulate their views on their role in decision making. None seemed irrational or unduly optimistic about what they wanted. The extent of their real participation was questioned; some felt powerless and frustrated, only able to influence trivial decisions, not the big ones. Info given to them was not fully understood. All the children mentioned the importance of the social worker in their lives – in particular, 'someone who can talk to children'. The quality of the relationships was by far the most important aspect of the service. Changes of social worker and unreliability on small issues (such as timekeeping) were complaints. Older children complained about lack of confidentiality and were reluctant to share thoughts and feelings because it would all get written down in the file and shared with strangers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Trotter, C. (2001)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| Aims of the study     | To examine the extent to which child protection workers use the skills identified in previous studies as more effective and whether the use of these skills relates to outcomes for clients. Skills include:  
  - clarity of role of worker  
  - use of authority  
  - encouraging client  
  - clarity of approved/disapproved action  
  - real problems addressed  
  - worker understands clients’ points of view and feelings. |
<p>| Intervention          | Evaluates, through different perspectives, naturally occurring interventions that take place during child protection process. The comparison is internal in the sense that it compares the cases in which skills identified as ‘effective’ were used and compares them to those where they were used less or not at all in the view of respondents. |
| Study design          | Quantitative study based on large number of interviews with child protection workers and family members. |
| Findings and conclusions | When effective practice skills are used and when clients respond to them, outcomes are generally positive. When workers use the skills, clients do better. No clear evidence that any particular skill is more powerful than any other. Most seem to be effective most of the time. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Westcott, H. and Davies, G. (1996)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aims of the study</strong></td>
<td>Legislative changes had occurred making it possible to use pre-recorded interviews with suspected victims of child abuse in court. This study investigates the nature of those interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention</strong></td>
<td>None; interviewing children about investigative interviews that had already taken place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study design</strong></td>
<td>Small qualitative study of 14 children using semi-structured interviews.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Findings and conclusions** | Authors conclude that the following would have helped the investigative interview:  
  • an explanation of what would happen  
  • choice about who was present  
  • choice about the interviewer  
  • provision of emotional support, a believing stance and minimising stress.  
Factors that did not help the child participate in the interview:  
  • lack of preparation  
  • evidential requirements dictating manner in which abuse was described  
  • use of age-inappropriate language  
  • disbelieving stance  
  • repeated questioning.  
Concerns were expressed by the researchers about possible tensions between evidential needs and children’s needs in context of the interview.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Thomas, N. (2000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aims of the study</strong></td>
<td>‘To find out how far (looked after) children are being involved in decisions since the implementation of the Children Act 1989 and to learn something about what factors enhance or impede their involvement’ (p 96).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention</strong></td>
<td>No intervention imposed by research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study design</strong></td>
<td>Qualitative interview study of 47 looked-after children, exploring involvement in decision-making processes set in context of survey of decision making in 225 cases. Described as ‘doubly reflexive’ – that is, interaction between adults and children is focus both of the content and of the process of the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Findings and conclusions</strong></td>
<td>Children communicate best with people with whom they have good and trusting relationships. Direct work with children should be prioritised, establishing significant space for this and all the associated skills in social work practice. This should not be undermined by formal assessment and other procedures, or by bureaucratic priorities. Communication takes time and patience. There is a need for flexibility in fitting systems and procedures to children, taking a child-centred focus, going at child’s pace, adapting the process to children, not vice versa. A presumption of children’s participation and competence should be the starting point, with support and advocacy built in. It is helpful to think less of a balance between children’s rights to participate and welfare/protection needs than an integration wherever possible. This needs time for preparations, explanations and support, to increase children’s competence to make choices consistent with their own welfare.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued.../
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Thomas, N. (2000) continued</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Findings and conclusions</td>
<td>Children prefer communication based on activity. Children prefer short utterances, but often experience adults as 'going on about things'. Children are often suspicious of adult questions. They suspect ulterior motives, and prefer informality of more unstructured interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims of the study</td>
<td>To examine process, content and outcome of supervision from perspective of three actors. To examine whether the young person benefited, and how far problems leading to supervision had reduced/disappeared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>Naturally occurring intervention; no comparison. Use of formal or informal supervision of teenagers by local authority social services. (Supervision was either formal, under judicial process in England and Wales, or non-judicial in Scotland.) Intervention aims at diversion from anti-social behaviour, or relief from family/peer pressures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study design</td>
<td>Prospective evaluation of naturally occurring intervention. Pre and 12-month post-intervention measures; no randomisation, control or comparison group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and conclusions</td>
<td>The relationship between the young person and social worker is key. Whether the intervention was perceived by the young person as helpful or intrusive, care or control was largely dependent on the quality of that relationship. Where young people found social workers easy to talk to, they appreciated them being straight, taking trouble, understanding and listening, the informality they brought to the relationship (including occasional outings together), continuity and keeping confidences.</td>
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SCIE Knowledge reviews are designed to provide social work educators and students with the resources to improve the teaching and learning on qualifying social work programmes.

This knowledge review is one of a series supporting the new social work degree. It follows a previous SCIE knowledge review, Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education, which identified the need to examine communication skills with children in more detail. The intended audience is primarily social work educators and students.

This publication is available in an alternative format upon request.