



Children's Safeguarding and Family Help

Direct work with children; practice
guidance

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Direct work with children and young people

1 Introduction and purpose

- The social work task is complex and requires a careful balancing of children's rights, views and wishes against the need to safeguard and promote their welfare. Often, social workers will also be dealing with the competing needs and expectations of parents and other family members at a time when the family are experiencing crisis. In these circumstances, there is a risk that social workers could lose sight of the child.
- Direct contact and work with children is crucial to keep the focus on the child. This document provides social workers with information and practice guidance on working with children in a way that keeps their needs in focus, supports their rights and allows them to participate fully in the decision-making process.

2 Children's rights

Children's vulnerability means that in many societies specific measures are taken to protect them from harm and support their development. Children need to have their own separate rights recognised for the following reasons:

- They need to be seen as being competent agents with separate needs from the adults in their life.
- They need special protection because of they are vulnerable and still developing and maturing.
- They may be less articulate than adults and are less likely to be heard or have influence over decisions taken about them.

In the UK, children's rights stem from the following:

- The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** as ratified by the UK gives children the right to health, education, family life, play and recreation, an adequate standard of living and to be protected from abuse and harm. The Convention also gives children the right to express their opinions and be listened to, particularly where decisions are being made that will affect their lives.
- The **Children Act 1989** makes it a requirement for social workers to seek the views and wishes of children according to their age and understanding when carrying out assessments and making decisions about them and that children are fully informed about what will happen to them and why.

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- Children also have rights under the **Human Rights Act 1998**.

3 Principles and standards

When working with children, the following principles and standards should apply:

- Children are competent agents who are capable of being involved in decisions affecting their lives. Therefore they will be encouraged to take part in all decision making processes and their consent to decisions sought in accordance with their age and stage of development so that they are able to take increasing control for their lives as they move towards adulthood.
- The child's voice will be heard, their rights upheld and their needs and wishes will be central to all work; their views will be given due consideration according to their age and stage of development and as far as this is consistent with their best interests.
- Social workers will aim to achieve shared decision-making in partnership with children and their parents so that there is clarity and consensus on the key issues, how these will be addressed and the work to be carried out with the child and family to improve outcomes.
- It is recognised that sometimes it may not be in the child's best interests to act on their wishes. In these cases, social workers will carefully balance the child's rights against the statutory duty to safeguard and promote their welfare. Where a child's wishes cannot be acted on, children will always have an explanation as to why this is.
- Social workers and IROs will take action to ensure children have access to independent advocates to enable them to participate in decision making forums and have their voices heard, and will act as advocates for children where this does not raise a conflict of interest.
- Social workers will take action to ensure children have access to universal services such as education and health and any other service or benefit to which they are entitled.
- Social workers will make all efforts to ensure children have an opportunity to speak freely about their experiences.

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- All decisions made about children will be transparent and accountable and fully recorded in their MOSAIC case record. Where social workers are unable to carry out the child's wishes, or where there is any difference of opinion between social workers and children, this will be clearly recorded with the reasons why given.

4 What is direct work?

4.1 Description of direct work

- Direct work is a vital part of social work based on good relationships that enables social workers to gain an understanding of the child's world and helps children make sense of their situation and life experiences. It describes the work carried out by social workers face-to-face with children in support of the social work process.
- Direct work can be practical and/or therapeutic in nature, may focus on different aspects of the child's life or history and can be centred around a specific activity depending on the age of the child and their stage of development.
- For looked after children in adoptive or long-term permanent placements, direct work can also be carried out as part of their life-story work in order to help them learn their history and gain a sense of identity. For further details on life story work for these children, please see the *Life story work* policy available at: [Life Story Books Guidance](#)

4.2 Why direct work is important

Direct work can:

- help social workers establish a trusting and supportive relationship with the child;
- allow the child to make sense of their experiences by providing them with a "safe space" in which to explore their feelings;
- provide social workers with an opportunity to gather information to inform assessment and planning;
- enable social workers to ascertain the child's views and wishes;
- help the child take part in the decision making process;
- help prepare children to deal with change and transition and to look forward to their future.

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4.3 Barriers to working effectively with children

Social workers should be aware that the following may have an adverse effect on their ability to work effectively with children:

- feeling that they lack the experience or confidence to carry out direct work;
- a lack of available time or an inappropriate venue;
- constant changes of social worker that affect the social worker's ability to build up a good relationship with the child;
- a focus on adults in the family and listening to their views on the situation rather than the child's;
- hostile or non-compliant parents and limited contact with the child;
- specific attributes or circumstances of the child that make it harder to establish a relationship and carry out direct work, for example disability, language barriers, children in custody;
- prioritising action to protect the child rather than working in a more collaborative way with them (although this may be necessary in some situations).

4.4 Children's views on their social worker – messages from research

- For most children who receive a social care service, their social worker is the most important person in their network.
- Children want to be seen as individuals in their own right and not just as a "problem".
- They want more say in decisions, especially the decision to accommodate them.
- They dislike social workers not being accessible, not turning up or turning up late or not doing what they promised.
- They like social workers who listen, show empathy, are reliable, who take action and respect confidences.
- Constant changes of social workers is frustrating and lessens children's ability to trust professionals.

5 Direct work practice guidance

5.1 Skills for direct work

Successful direct work requires a strong positive and trusting relationship between the child and the social worker; it may take time to develop a rapport with children and social workers may find early meetings difficult. Children who have experienced abuse, neglect

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and adversity often find it difficult to open up and share their experiences with others unless they feel they can trust that person.

For direct work to succeed, social workers need to:

- actively listen to the child
- take into account their non-verbal communications
- empathise with their views
- be sensitive to their cues
- provide information, clarification and explanation where appropriate
- make sure children understand the nature of confidentiality and what information cannot be kept secret.

To do this, social workers should:

- use of a variety of creative tools, interviewing and listening techniques that are child-focused and move at the child's pace;
- show personal qualities such as being warm and caring, empathetic and honest in order to engage the child and build trusting relationships;
- use trauma-informed practice and approaches to get an understanding of the child's lived experience and how events have impacted on their behaviour and development;
- empower the child to get their views across by spending time with them and being reliable, respectful and non-judgemental;
- communicate with children in order to understand how their experiences affect their development and communications and the impact on them of having social services involvement in their lives;
- use reflective supervision opportunities to explore any feelings and issues that arise from the work.

5.2 Planning and preparation

Direct work provides children with a safe space and an opportunity to express and explore their feelings and experiences and it is the responsibility of the social worker to ensure the right conditions are in place for this to happen.

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To gain the maximum benefit from the time spent with the child, social workers should:

- plan direct work sessions in advance and agree the work to be carried out in supervision;
- be clear about the purpose of direct work and what is to be achieved, for example for gathering assessment information, as a therapeutic activity or to support the child and implement their plan;
- ensure the venue is suitable to support the work and allow the child to focus; older children may prefer to meet in a neutral venue but it may be best for younger children if work is carried out at home or their placement;
- decide on what activities and tools to facilitate direct work will be used that are suitable to the age of the child and any disability or communication difficulty; use the direct work library (accessed via the Participation Officer) for ideas and resources to facilitate direct work;
- plan visits to carry out direct work to take place within normal working hours but not interfere with school or other activities; planned work should only be cancelled in extenuating circumstances.
- set aside enough time to carry out the direct work so that it is not “rushed”; the child and their carers need to know how long each session is likely to last and how many sessions there will be;
- plan outings with children in advance and carry out a risk assessment in terms of the child’s age, stage of development, management of behaviours and the nature of the outing proposed;

All direct work should be recorded on the child’s MOSAIC case record in case notes giving details of what work was carried out, when, and who was present. Records should include information on what was discussed with the child, their responses to questions, their perception of their situation and their stated wishes and feelings.

5.3 Parents and carers

- Every care should be taken to ensure that parent and carers are informed of what work will be carried out with the child and why so that they do not feel excluded. The work with the child will be more successful if the parent/carer is supportive.

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- Consideration needs to be given as to whether parents or carers should be involved in direct work.
- When making arrangements, social workers should check with parents and carers about the best time to meet with the child and should make every effort to be on time.

5.4 Preparing the child

Ensure the child:

- is prepared for the direct work, and has had an explanation as to its purpose and how it will be carried out so that they feel safe and reassured;
- feels comfortable with the venue; they should be consulted about the choice of venue and timing of appointments.
- is seen alone so that they can freely express their views and feelings about the care they are receiving; it is important that a child feels able to speak privately without being overheard and that parents and carers are clear about why it is necessary for the child to be seen alone.
- is aware that although what they say is confidential, it is not possible for social workers to keep secrets; they should be made aware of the circumstances under which information may be shared with others and why, for example if they are thought to be at risk of harm.

5.5 Children with disabilities

- Take advice from health professionals working with the child about their disability and how this will impact on their ability to take part in direct work and what support they will need.
- If the child has a communication difficulty, take advice on their preferred method of communications.
- Be aware of “hidden” disabilities, for example children on the autistic spectrum, who may not present as having any difficulty.
- For children with physical disabilities, consider the practical aspects of them taking part in direct work and make adaptations to make direct work accessible to them.

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- Use suitable and appropriate equipment and resources that have been adapted for the child's use.
- Set aside additional time to cover the work to be carried out.

5.6 Engaging the child

- Discussions with the child should be structured in a way that allows them to talk freely in a manner that they feel comfortable with.
- Keep the conversation simple and straightforward and easy for the child to understand.
- Children have reported that they do not want to be viewed as a “problem”; therefore it is important to show an interest in the child and their life as a whole and to try to avoid focusing too heavily on the issues.
- Consider age appropriate ways to engage the child, for example, drawing and the use of games and play. Older children may prefer other communications methods such as videos, photographs or electronic media and may prefer to meet in neutral venues.
- For younger children under 5 years observation will be key to communication so social workers could explore methods such as working with objects such as figures and animals, use of ecomaps or masks and faces to help children communicate.
- It is helpful to ask the child what they know already and what explanations they have in order to clarify what the child's knowledge and understanding of the situation is.
- Use open questions such as ‘would you tell me what happened?’ or “how did that make you feel?”. Open questions invite a wider response, than closed questions, which tend to invite specific responses.
- Use active listening techniques such as gentle verbal prompts, be patient with silences, and allow the child to reflect. Clarify things if needed at this stage; the child may be unable to verbalise and may find other forms of expression, such as drawing, more helpful.

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- When recording notes, use the child's own words. Do not make assumptions about what the child is referring to, for example, if the child refers to being touched on a part of their body this could be clarified by allowing them to point to a picture or a doll.

5.7 Managing safeguarding concerns

- Where the child is living in concerning circumstances, areas for exploration could include:
 - what they need to know to keep safe
 - how the situation impacts on them
 - what they would like to see change
 - who they trust and confide in
 - where and how they would access help.
- Avoid being critical of an alleged perpetrator as the child may have ambivalent feelings towards them and may not feel able to express their true feelings in the face of adult's opinions.
- The child may be concerned about a perpetrator 'getting into trouble'. Whilst being honest and reassuring it is necessary to stress that it would not be their fault if this were to be the case. It may be better to discuss how the perpetrator can be given help in relation to this.
- To assuage any anxieties you could say 'It's okay to tell me'. Avoid saying anything which could be seen as leading.
- It is important to get across that there is no right or wrong answer. It may help to talk generally about how other children manage or experience similar situations.
- Convey to the child that they have a right to have their own opinions and that they will be listened to and respected.
- Decide what information and advice would be helpful and necessary for the child.

5.8 Dealing with disclosures

In communicating with children where there are concerns regarding abuse it is important to observe the following principles:

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- The child must not be further abused by the conversation; this can be avoided or minimised by establishing a rapport with the child and using counselling skills, including active listening, and sensitive questioning which does not go beyond what is necessary.
- It is important to be clear what your own role is in relation to other professionals involved and that you are aware of your own reaction to what is being said.
- Keep an open mind about allegations that are made; professionals should take seriously a child's account but keep an open mind and seek to find the evidence and indicators of the abuse. It is rare for children to lie about abuse that has occurred.
- Gather information without asking leading questions; evidence given in court may be ruled inadmissible if it can be claimed that questioning led the child to the response. A 'leading question' is one which by its wording, may lead the respondent towards a particular type of answer, for example "what did he do to you next" implies that he did do something further to the child.

6 Working with adolescents

- The onset of puberty, coupled with major transitions young people experience at this stage in their lives can place many pressures on them. It is also a time when young people are developing their own sense of identity, gaining a higher level of independence and formulating important relationships and internal values.
- Adolescence can therefore be a time of anxiety and mental and emotional difficulties.
- The physical, psychological and social changes young people experience can result in a lessening of family influence as peers become more important and an increase in risk-taking behaviours. This can make them more vulnerable to extra-familial harm.
- A growing number of children who are known to CSSW now come from the 10-15 and 16 plus age range and working with this group can present many challenges. Engagement may be difficult as young people may see intervention by social workers as an interference with their assertion of independence. Young people who are being exploited are likely to be particularly difficult to reach due to fear of reprisals or because they do not recognise their exploitation.

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- The manner in which direct work with young people is carried out will naturally differ from younger children, acknowledging their growing independence, empowering them to make their own choices and prepare for adulthood whilst managing any risks to their welfare.

Practice guidance

Good relationships with young people are essential to encourage engagement, and the following practice points can help achieve this:

- Establish a rapport with the young person by showing an interest in all aspects of their life.
- Agree ground rules in advance, including asking the young person what they want to achieve and telling them what they can expect from your involvement.
- Consider the environment in which you meet the young person; some find a school setting too formal or inhibiting. You should ask the young person whether they prefer to meet you alone or if they want their parents to be involved.
- Maintain confidentiality; this should be respected unless there are good reasons, such as concerns about safety or risk to the young person from others. The limits to confidentiality should be explained to the young person.
- Show respect for the young person; although they all have differing attitudes towards authority, most want to know that they are valued and that they are treated with fairness.
- Actively listen to the young person; direct work should be carried out with empathy and an acceptance of the young person and being able to see issues from their perspective. Techniques such as maintaining eye contact, and being aware of the young person's body language, shows that you are interested in what they have to say.
- Use trauma-informed practice to explore the impact of adverse childhood experiences on the young person.
- Work in partnership with parents to support them and to improve relationships between the child and parent. Family Group Conferences can be considered as a method of harnessing family strengths so that families can build resilience and find solutions for sustainable change.

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- Open ended questions give the young person an opportunity to open up and discuss issues fully; check and clarify what they have said to demonstrate that you have understood their point.
- Recognise why the young person is not engaging and try to address any barriers.
- Be consistent, persistent, open and honest when working with children, explaining options for intervention and giving young people choices. Where young people are at risk but engagement is difficult, keep communicating with them to show them that help is always available.
- Using independent advocates where possible to bridge gaps in trust or seek support from others with specific knowledge and experience of working with this cohort. Where there is a large professional network, the young person could be given a choice as to which professional is their keyworker.

7 Equality and diversity issues

- For some children, direct work may present a particular challenge, either because of attributes of the child such as disability, or because of their circumstances, for example children in custody. As these children can be most vulnerable to harm it is essential that the planning stage is used to identify any potential barriers faced in participating in direct work and how these can be overcome so that all children can have the same opportunity to tell their story.
- It is important that social workers are sensitive to the specific needs and circumstances of individual children and how these may impact on how direct work is undertaken, with consideration given to issues of diversity including ethnicity, religion, class and language as well as issues of disability, gender and sexuality.
- An understanding of how these differences impact on children is essential as it will affect the following:
 - how they influence the child's experiences
 - how children communicate those experiences
 - how children perceive issues
 - to what extent parents allow children to be involved in discussion

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- Cultural background and family beliefs will influence how, for example, mental illness is experienced, defined and explained. It is important therefore in working with children to be conscious of the words and language used by the parents. Parents may have very definite views regarding how and when children should speak and be heard. This may be very relevant in cases where there is parental resistance to working with children
- To overcome these issues, social workers should (in consultation with the child) consider referring the child and their family to a culturally appropriate resource and ensuring a choice of support worker or a support worker of the same ethnicity which may be advantageous in enabling children to talk about problems and access help.
- Social workers should remain aware that, while cultural sensitivity is important, this should always be balanced against the primary need to protect and safeguard children. Where there are child protection concerns, this should take precedence.
- When carrying out direct work, social workers should remain aware of their own social GRRACCEESS (Gender, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Class, Ethnicity, Sexual orientation etc) and recognise how these influence their interactions with a child and their family. This is particularly important as it is not always possible to find a culturally appropriate resource to work with the child.
- Social workers need to be able to acknowledge similarities and differences between their own social GRAACEESS and that of the child and/or their family's, considering how these may impact on existing power differentials in the working relationship and discrimination they already experience in wider society.
- It is essential that the social worker works with the child to explore the child's social identities, so that they are able to understand the child's lived experience and see this through the prism of the child and family's culture and value system collaboratively rather than trying to interpret it in isolation. This will strengthen the voice of the child through seeking their wishes and feelings during assessment in order to inform intervention planning.

8 Professional conduct and safe working practice

- When working with children, social workers should recognise the importance of maintaining professional standards of behaviour and should refer to the Social Work Professional Standards for guidance.
<https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/>

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- Social workers need to ensure that their behaviour is not open to misinterpretation by children and that they follow safe practice rules in order to safeguard them from misplaced or malicious allegations. Further information can be found in the *Safe working practice* guidance available at: <https://ascpractice.camden.gov.uk/media/3375/guidance-for-safer-working-practice-for-adults-who-work-with-children-and-young-people1.pdf>
- Social workers should avoid inappropriate physical contact with children when working with them, although it is accepted that some limited contact will be necessary in the course of working with the child, for example in order to re-assure a child. Social workers should maintain professional boundaries at all times and report and record any instances where a child seeks inappropriate physical contact.
- Social workers should also maintain professional boundaries online and should not communicate with children via their personal social media accounts or mobile phones. For further guidance please see the CSCP Online safety guidance available at: <..\Online safety\online safety policies\Multi-agency online safety policy.doc>

9 Training

Social workers should take up any opportunities for training to improve their skills for direct work with children and young people. Training is available on the following and social workers should discuss training needs in supervision and apply for places via the TDC.

- Life-story work and direct work with children
- Motivational interviewing
- Challenging behaviour in young people
- Supporting parents in managing teenagers
- Mediation skills in family relationships.

10 Links with other policies and models of social work

Direct work with children should empower them to participate in decision-making and make their wishes and feelings known in order to improve outcomes. It should also facilitate the implementation of the child's plan.

The following policies and ways of working should inform direct work practice:

Participation: Details of how to facilitate children's participation can be found in the *Participation* policy and strategy.

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[participation-policy-and-strategy.pdf](#)

Advocacy: Information on advocacy in Camden can be found in the CSFH *Advocacy* policy.

<https://ascpractice.camden.gov.uk/media/3387/advocacy-policy.pdf>

Signs of Safety: Signs of Safety is the strengths-based model of practice used in CSFH for child protection cases and has a set of tools that are useful for social workers to help children articulate their worries and hopes.

<https://ascpractice.camden.gov.uk/media/3082/signs-of-safety-framework.pdf>