research
in practice

Practice
Tool

Enabling and embedding creative participation in child and family social work

Dartington
Trust

www.researchinpractice.org.uk

Introduction

We all have a need to be seen and heard. For children who have experienced disruption, harm, danger or trauma, this need is crucial and it is the job of child and family social work professionals to ensure this happens.

The ability to make connections and 'move'[1] with children (Ferguson, 2016; Winter et al., 2017) requires trusting relationships with reliable practitioners, particularly when they have the power to make decisions on a child's behalf (Cossar et al., 2016). However, research identifies that:

- **children can be unsure what is written in the plans designed to keep them safe**
- **participation is infrequently embedded into everyday social work practice**
- **the concept of wishes and feelings is often misunderstood.**

  (Dillon et al., 2016; Dillon, 2021)

Serious Case Reviews (now known as Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews) have consistently emphasised the missed opportunities of talking and listening to children in social work (for example, Laming, 2003; Rogers, 2013). Despite this, there remains an absence of practice guidance on ways to do this.

The need to develop effective communication skills to improve the quality of everyday interactions with children is an important component of professional education and practice (Lefevre, 2018; Ruch et al., 2019). Just as all children are unique, each relationship and interaction between a child and practitioner will be distinctive and influenced by the child's individual experiences.

This practice tool considers the degree to which children can actively take part in decision-making processes that affect their safety and security. It focuses on:

- **keeping the child 'visible' (Ferguson, 2017)**
- **encouraging deeper collaborative and relational encounters with children**
- **providing examples of good practice, using a fictional and unfolding case study to explore how social workers can creatively facilitate children's participation.**

The practice tool includes sections that cover the following themes:

- **The definition and principles of participation, from a theoretical, legal and policy perspective.**
- **A series of reflective questions to consider how to make space for child participation.**
- **Ideas to create individual and bespoke resources/activities with children, enabling them to participate in their own planning, in a way that suits them.**

Although the tool focuses on participation in child protection processes, it is of relevance for practitioners across all settings, including social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), early help practitioners and children's advocates.

1 Ferguson refers to 'moving' as 'capturing how people act and move as well as talk' (p.284), so shifting the focus away from sitting in one room and gathering information in one way, towards interaction in different ways.

What do we mean by participation? Definitions and frameworks

The term 'participation' has a number of uses, inferences and applications within voluntary and statutory children's services. Participation, at its most basic, means 'taking part' in an activity or within decision-making (Thomas, 2007). Active participation goes beyond consultation, or simply listening to the child's views, and involves a child having '...reason to believe their involvement will make a difference' (Sinclair, 2004 in Thomas, 2007, p. 3-4).

Hart's (1992) theoretical framework for youth participation identifies eight ladder-rungs that a child or young person must climb in order to reach the 'ultimate participatory level' - that is child-initiated and shared decision-making with adults (see figure 1).

The ladder of participation

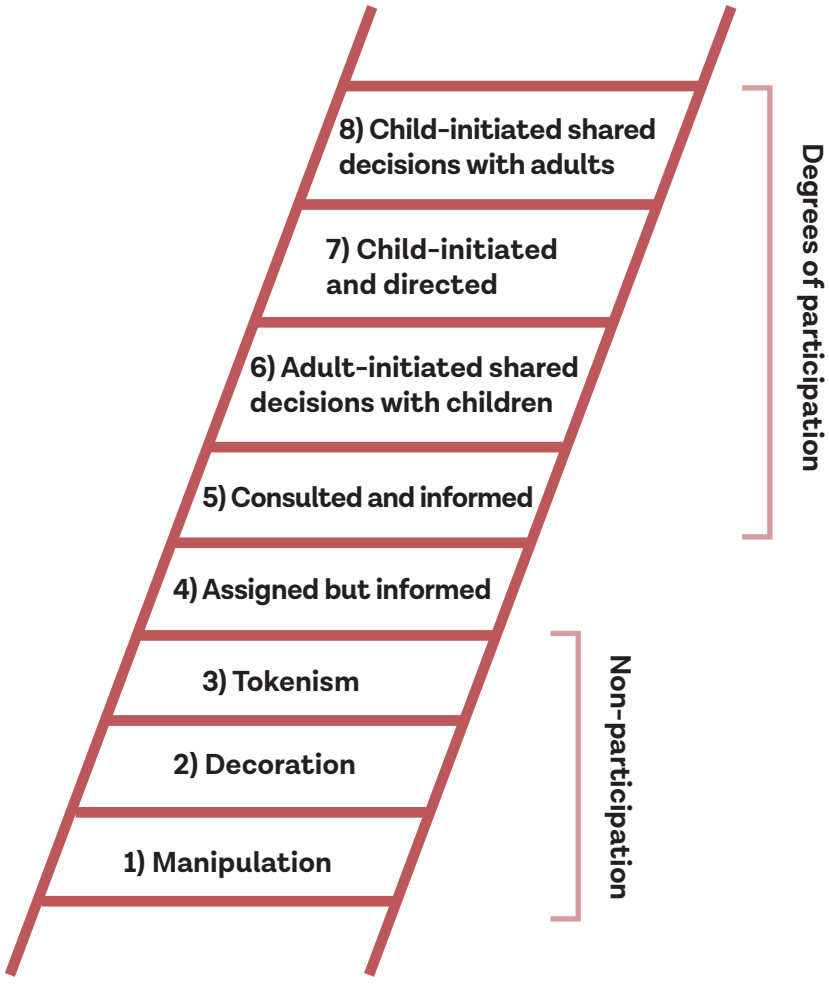


Figure 1: The ladder of participation (Hart, 1992)

Shier's (2001) Pathway to Participation (figure 2) builds on Hart's work, by guiding practitioners through a series of questions and making clear the point at which the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989) is endorsed. Shier maintains that children should be involved in the stages and processes where decisions are actually made, ultimately sharing adult power.

Pathways to participation (Shier, 2001)

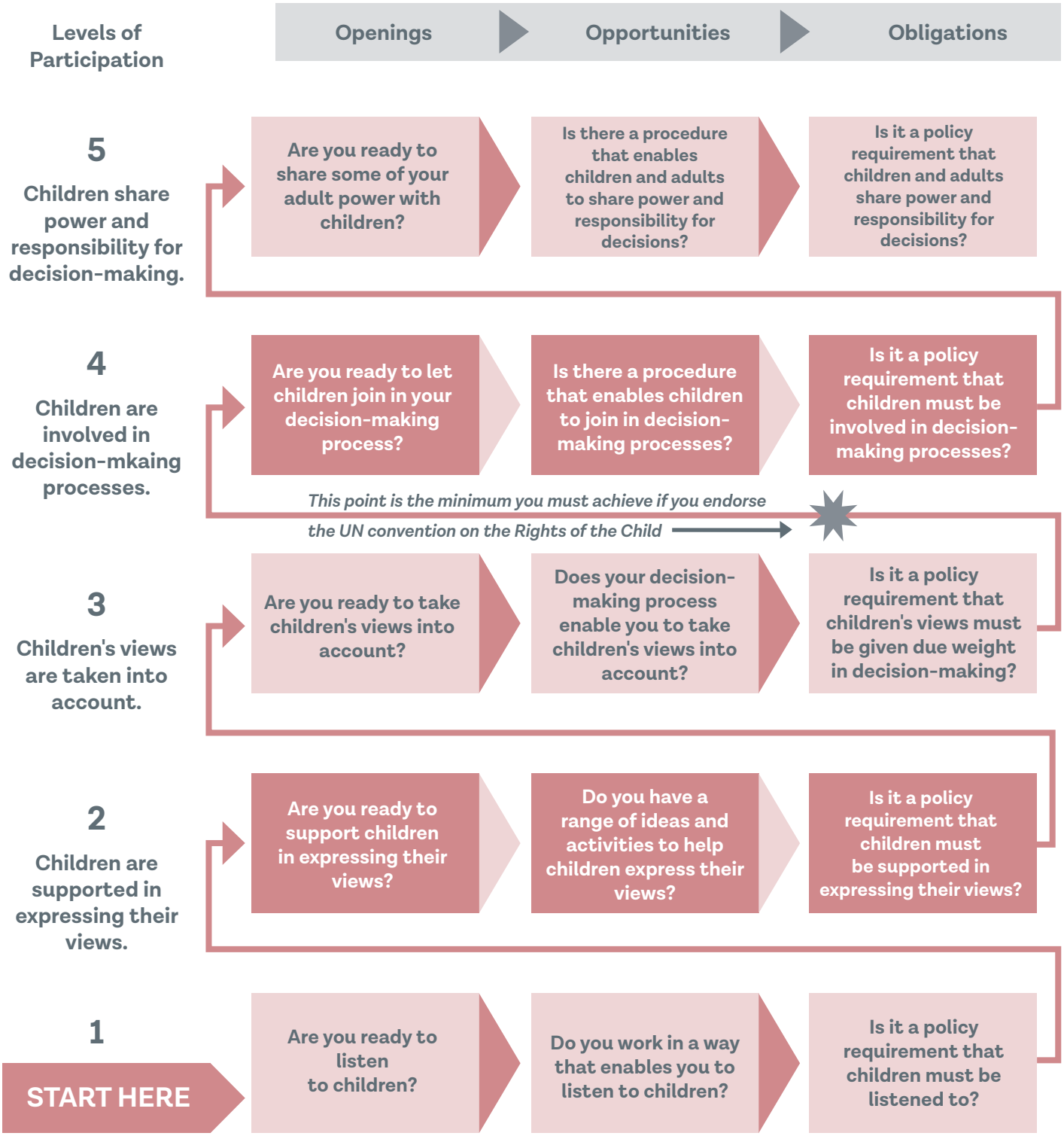


Figure 2: Pathways to participation (Shier, 2001)

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children's views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. However, Lundy (2007) argues that 'voice is not enough' and proposes a four-stage model of participation comprising:

- **Space**

  Children must be given safe and inclusive opportunities to express their view.
- **Voice**

  Children must be facilitated to express their view.
- **Audience**

  The view must be listened to.
- **Influence**

  The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.

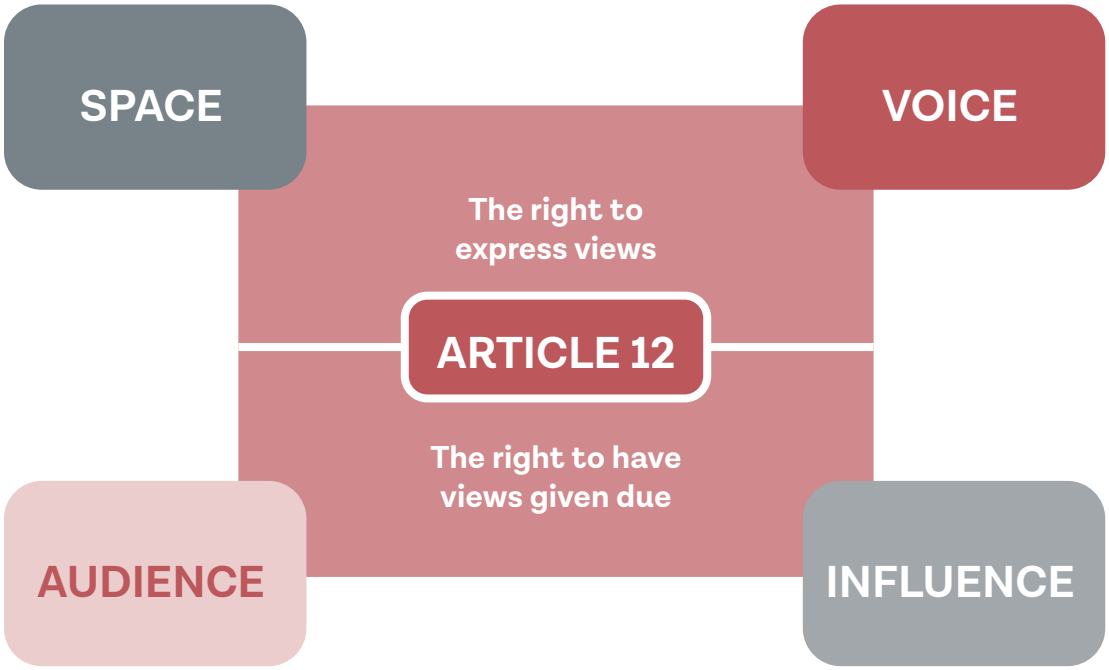


Figure 3: The Lundy Model (Lundy, 2007)

Participation within the context of child protection

When considering participation, children are viewed as human and social beings, and citizens with rights (Beresford, 2021). Children are 'social actors' - that is, they have 'agency' (Cossar et al., 2016), which means that to a greater or lesser extent they can choose what to do and how to do it. In this way, even if they have significant restrictions or limitations placed on their ability to exercise their rights, children still have influence in their environment and on the choices they make. In this way, participation accepts that children are not powerless.

In social work, however, the use of participatory models (displaying increasing levels of power and importance) become difficult to apply as they sit uncomfortably within statutory child protection processes. The involuntary nature of child protection, along with the perceived level of risk to the child, can be a barrier to the child's agency and ultimately limit their choices (Dillon et al., 2016). Whilst children have the choice to opt out of engaging with their child protection plan, social workers are compelled by law to fulfil their statutory duties. Despite this restrictive structure, children still have a level of agency and can continue to make choices for themselves.

Dillon (2021) focused on embedding participation within child protection social work. Her continuous loop, or revolutions, of participation (figure 4) reminds social workers that sharing information with children, recording their wishes and feelings and facilitating decision-making forums are not in and of themselves participatory.

To become participatory these activities need to be inter-connected and dynamic. For example, it would be impossible to ascertain a child's wishes and feelings on actions taken, or services provided, without a child understanding their own plan or the reasons for social worker presence (s.53 *Children Act 2004*).

After recording the child's wishes and feelings, social workers must act on them, share the outcomes with the child and then seek the child's opinion once more. Thus, participation in child and family social work becomes a cycle - a repeated revolution of information-sharing, consultation and interdependent relationship-building that ultimately shapes decisions.

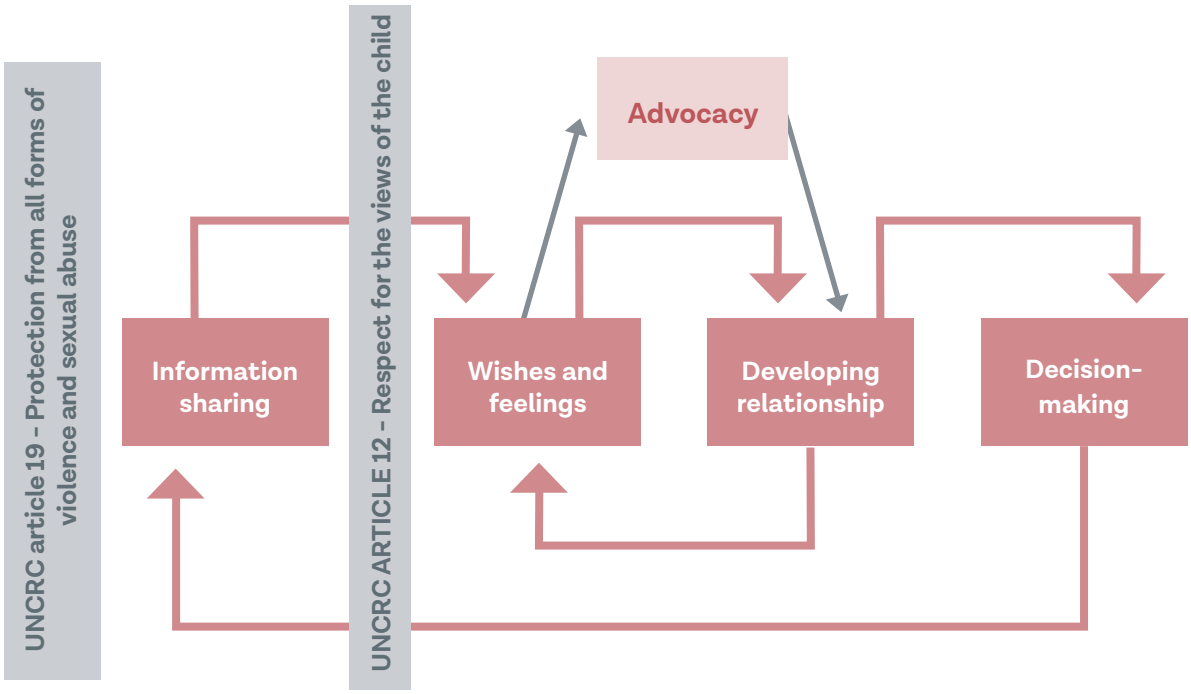


Figure 4: 'Revolutionising' participation (Dillon, 2019)

Reflective exercise

Thinking about Lundy's (2007) 'Space - Voice - Audience - Action' model, and considering the response required to children's wishes and feelings (Dillon, 2019), consider the following issues that are often raised as barriers to children's participation:

- Children may need separate, safe spaces to share their views with social workers (Manful et al., 2020). How do you prepare for this?
- Will you complete aspects of work with the child alongside those who look after them? How are you preparing for each encounter and foregrounding the work with the parent or carer, for example? (Winter et al., 2017)
- Social workers often visit children in school, yet children may not want to miss their lessons (Dillon. 2019). Do you routinely check what learning/activity the child may be missing in order to meet with you? Do you ask children where they prefer to be visited? Do you amend the way you dress (for example, remove your local authority lanyard)?
- Once you have initiated or developed a space in which to work with a child, how do you address the immediate imbalance of power? Do the children with whom you work fully understand your presence and purpose? What specifically can you do to reduce this level of worry?
- Can children contact you at a time that suits them, rather than at a time stipulated by you? If not, how are you hearing their voice (Lundy, 2007) or ascertaining their wishes and feelings in between your visits? (Dillon et al., 2016).
- It's recognised that social workers are often very busy, therefore advocacy services can be crucial in embedding children's opinions into decision-making (Thomas et al., 2017). Who are the advocates / children's rights officers / participation workers linked to your organisation? What are their referral criteria? Which children are excluded from this service? How does their role fit with yours?
- Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) requires social workers to share child protection plans and subsequent actions with children. Are you routinely doing this? How are you making this process appeal to each individual child?

Legal and policy context

The duty for social workers to enact participation is recognised and accounted for in UK-based legislation and the UNCRC (UN General Assembly, 1989). Further examples of participatory guidelines are scattered throughout national and local policy, and practice frameworks, rather than contained in a separate publication.

For example, practitioners follow statutory guidance in the form of *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (Department for Education, 2018) (such as the section entitled '**Children have said that they need**' on page 10). More recently, Ofsted guidance (2021, p. 52) stipulates that children must be listened to and requires social work practitioners to focus 'on their needs and experiences...influenced by their wishes and feelings'. As such, social work practice will be inspected on these elements.

Children's rights legislation

Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN General Assembly, 1989) states that children who are capable of forming their own views may express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. McCafferty (2017) states that children need to simply give a view, not necessarily a mature view.

Alongside the UNCRC, the primary legislation in England and Wales that compels social workers to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children is *s.53 Children Act* (2004). However, the purpose of 'wishes and feelings' differs depending on which children are being worked with, and under which section of the law.

s.17 Children Act (1989) / s.53 (1) Children Act (2004) states that 'before determining what (if any) services to provide for a particular child in need...a local authority shall...(a) ascertain the child's wishes and feelings ***regarding the provision of those services***; and (b) give due consideration (having regard to his age and understanding) to such wishes and feelings of the child as they have been able to ascertain'.

The wording is different when working in child protection proceedings:

Regarding the planning of action to be taken with respect to a child, *s.47 Children Act (1989) / s.53 (3) Children Act (2004)* states that 'a local authority shall....(a) ascertain the child's wishes and feelings ***regarding the action to be taken with respect to him***; and (b) give due consideration (having regard to his age and understanding) to such wishes and feelings of the child as they have been able to ascertain'.

Further primary legislation incorporating the duty of 'wishes and feelings':

Children and Families Act (2014) - local authorities must provide vulnerable children and their families (including children with disabilities and special educational needs) with the means to take part in discussions regarding their own care, incorporating access to advocacy and mediation services. With the legislation asking for 'participation as fully as possible' practitioners must consider how to build relationships with children who may need alternative methods of communication. For more information on inclusive communication with children, see: ***Communicating with children and young people with speech, language and communication needs, and/or developmental delay.***

Children and Social Work Act (2017) - local authorities in England must '...encourage [looked-after and care-experienced] children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings' (s.1) and take them into account.

Participatory principles specific to child and family social work

In recognition of the Lundy (2007) model, and drawing on the work of Dillon (2019), the following principles should underpin participation within child and family social work. These principles encompass a range of values and philosophical perspectives, and can be applied within a variety of practice models or approaches.

- Children have the right to be included and consulted on any decisions that impact on them, with their responses shaping subsequent actions.
- Practitioners need to be explicit and clear about their reason for any involvement in a child's life.
- Every child has the right to a creative life and the ability to express their wishes and feelings in the manner they choose.
- Social workers must evidence how children's wishes and feelings have shaped their child protection plan and children are intrinsically connected with any activity undertaken to keep them safe.
- Practitioners should recognise that all children are unique and have different preferences, qualities and attributes. As such, every child will need an individual, bespoke approach to participation that does not rely on homogenous and standardised ways of working.
- Participatory practice is not linear. Every process and activity undertaken with children should be iterative, dynamic, built on, responded to, and reflected upon together with the child.
- Children have the right to redress and reflection.
- Safety and child protection work should not be seen as something done to a child or a process of information-extraction from the child, but something to do *with* and alongside the child over a period of time.
- Practice should endeavour to build children's capital (the set of resources available to them - for example power, knowledge, inclusion, safety, confidence, agency).
- Participatory practice should recognise the unique experiences of children in relation to their race, ethnicity, ability and gender.

The **MIRRA Project** has developed a similar set of principles for participatory record keeping that are relevant across children's social care and can be applied to all children, young people and families (for further information see: **Good practice in recording and access to records: Strategic Briefing, 2022**).

Thinking about participation in your practice

The recording of 'the child's voice' or 'wishes and feelings' via a piece of 'direct work' is a core expectation in child and family social work. However, these phrases often become conflated and confused, and used interchangeably. It may be useful to explore the implications of each phrase in the following table in order to prevent it becoming meaningless jargon.

What do the following terms mean?

'The child's voice'
This is an umbrella term, often relating to the visibility and presence of the child within social care work. It can refer to the child's feelings, opinions and views regarding themselves and their 'lived experience'. Being more specific about how we intend to elevate the child's voice can kick-start meaningful participation as well as promote action from the social care practitioner and a response to the child.

'Lived experience'
The child's experience, and their perception of the nature and quality of their everyday life. It should be rooted in assessment and weaved throughout all analysis of the child's world.

'Wishes and feelings'
Often conflated with lived experience, yet legislation specifically requires children's opinions on services provided and actions taken (*s.53 Children Act 2004*). Part of a wider participatory cycle (Dillon, 2021), wishes and feelings must be acted upon and responded to, even if their wishes are not in their best interest. This does not mean agreeing to all children's requests, but the child should expect acknowledgement and restoration. Ascertaining wishes and feelings is not a 'tick box exercise' to be 'done', but is a dynamic process that continually captures moments in time.

'Direct work'
A phrase often used to refer to any 'formal' piece of work undertaken by a social care practitioner with a child, usually requested when an outcome / response is needed from children, for example 'wishes and feelings'. To avoid ambiguity or worry about what 'to do', use phrases such as 'playing with', 'getting to know' or 'asking the child's opinion'.

It is also important for practitioners to consider the extent to which their practice enables individual children to meaningfully participate in their plans, in adherence to statutory legislation and policy. As professionals, you will be working with a diverse range of children at different levels of intervention. This will need you to address different aspects of the law with different children. An unfolding case study which shows how this works in practice is presented below.

The following exercise sets out some reflective activities that support deeper critical thinking about your own, and your organisation's, approach to child participation.

Reflective exercise - Making space for participation

Personal reflection:

Take a moment to reflect on the following questions. You do not need to overthink this. Write down what comes to mind.

- What beliefs, values and moral codes guide you?
- How can you, as a social care practitioner, endeavour to adopt a 'proactive' approach to participation if there is no framework/guidance in your organisation?

Team/Group reflection:

Hold a conversation with your team about the following:

- How do we make space to address children's participation within the organisation?
- What do your organisation's audit tools say about expectations of children's participation in their child protection intervention (this can include assessments and plans, visits, meetings etc.) Find the tool and look at the wording/terminology (for example voice, lived experience, direct work). Are you clear on the meaning of the terminology?
- What child-centred practices are you already doing? Is this in keeping with the principles of participation?

Relinquishing power to work in partnership with children - the shift from interrogation to co-production

Attention to power dynamics is crucial when exploring opportunities that enable children to meaningfully 'take part' within child protection planning. Children who have experienced abuse and neglect will have encountered significant power imbalances that may have caused them harm or distress. Therefore, in maintaining principles of active participation, the mechanisms and methods used to protect children from further harms should seek to reposition and share power with the child.

The sharing of power does not need to be a grand gesture, but rather a recognition of mutual respect and joint action. Doing what we say we will do, in a timely manner, in a way that makes sense to children is key to redressing the power imbalance.

In recognition that all children are unique, and have different preferences, qualities and attributes, every child requires an individual approach that does not rely on homogenous and standardised ways of working (Ruch et al., 2019; Dillon, 2021). For example, children communicate through play yet this does not fit to 'formal adult processes' of communication. As such, you need to consider how you can adapt your approach to allow you to step into the child's world.

Creating playful activities, building relationships and moving towards bespoke resources

In recent years, many local authorities have adopted social work frameworks such as 'Signs of Safety' (Turnell & Edwards, 1999). As a result, standardised templates that draw on creative methods to ascertain the lived experience of children (for example, 'Three Houses', Weld & Greening, 2013) or to explain concerns (for example, 'Words and Pictures', Turnell & Essex, 2006) are used extensively. These have provided a welcome contribution towards child-centred assessment and plans.

The participatory principles outlined in this tool, however, highlight the importance of going one step further by encouraging a shift away from reliance on standardised resources. By recognising children's unique needs and abilities, it is possible to co-produce bespoke activities based on their communication and creativity preferences. Being creative with children avoids duplication of tasks, where children are repeatedly asked the same questions via the same methods of communication (Dillon, 2021).

What is creativity and why should we bother?

We are all creative in some way. Creativity occurs in the choice and combination of the things we do to satisfy ourselves or to make something meaningful. For example, creativity can involve combining words together for a poem, choosing clothes for our outfits or selecting memories for a memory box. Creativity involves self-expression and choice, and there are no good or bad choices for creativity. We are simply concerned with the creation of **something new**, as agreed with the child, which can lead to reflection, discussion and communication.

The creative process offers children a protective way of expressing themselves, making space for interpretation, reinterpretation and discussion. As a very formal process, child protection has huge consequences for children. Using creative methods can help flatten power imbalances and elevate children's views and self-expression, removing the focus from 'big actions and changes' towards helping a child understand the need for support and family adaptation. Its reflective nature enables re-visitation - for example, using journal/diary entries to remember how a child felt at a particular moment, or responding to a particular event.

Harnessing creativity and gaining skills

Qualifying as a child and family practitioner does not automatically bestow you with the ability to be creative and innovative within your practice (Lefevre, 2015). These skills need to be practiced from a position of curiosity and willingness to learn. However, research shows that embedding participation into social work practice is often dependent on the availability and capability of the practitioner. Therefore, you need to be open to developing and honing new creative skills (Dillon, 2019).

Take time to consider the following:

- Creative participatory social work involves the imagining of new ideas, experimentation, finding unique ways to communicate and facilitating self-expression. It is important for you to adopt a creative and flexible mindset when working with children.
- Some children may have reservations about creative methods, and prefer to just talk. This is ok as the focus is on communicating in a way that the child chooses. However, if you show your reluctance to be creative and flexible through low energy, lack of confidence or impatience, a child may follow suit and opt out. Even if we perceive ourselves as lacking in creative abilities, we can turn this to an advantage, as it allows the child to be the creative expert in this scenario.
- Engaging in a shared activity can be a vehicle for developing trust, understanding and communication. Harnessing notions of play and playful exploration, by using collaborative and child-centred activities, practitioners can support communication that suits the child's unique interests and abilities (Hatton, 2013; O'Reilly & Dolan, 2016).
- The longer you spend with the child, the better. Being prepared for creativity, and offering a choice of activities and materials, can promote discussion led by the child through the activities.

It is important to be realistic about your opportunities and timescales, as well as being mindful of your duty. The **Talking and Listening to Children Project**, for example, introduces the 'Child - Case - Context' model and reminds practitioners that every encounter with children is unique, as is their environment.

For further information on listening to children and understanding their experiences watch this video by Jenny Molloy: **Hearing Marginalised Voices in Social Work - Practice Supervisor Development Programme** and also the linked briefing: **Hearing children's voices**.

Making physical space for creativity may be tricky and will need incorporating into your pre-visit planning, alongside your preparation for purposeful communication (Winter et al., 2017). Children want (and need) to be seen and heard (Briheim-Crookall et al., 2020 - for further information see: **Bright Spots Programme - Coram Voice**). Visiting children for a chat, or as an after-thought ("I was just passing by...") reinforces the imbalance of power due to our non-voluntary presence and our lack of attention to each child's preferred method of communication.

The following reflective questions are designed to explore your knowledge, capabilities and concerns regarding creative work with children. They can be used as the basis of discussions within groups, in supervision or as an individual.

Reflective exercise

Staying curious - knowledge, capabilities and concerns regarding creative work with children
> What tools for working with children do you already have? How child-led are they? How inclusive are they?
> Do you use the same tool(s) for different children? If so, how do they align with the child's preferences?
> Do you ask the child how they feel about using these tools?
> Is the use of these tools compulsory in your local authority? Is there any flexibility to what you are able to use?
> How do you feel about notions of 'creativity'? For example, do you connect creativity with artistic merit or skills? Do you feel vulnerable within your skillset or are you confident in being creative?
> Do you routinely discuss participatory practice within supervision? Is there an opportunity to share your overarching approach to participation, along with identifying individual participatory steps in a case-by-case approach?

You may find it helpful to look at the following resources for practice supervision:
Practice Supervisor Development Programme

Participation in practice

This section of the tool uses a fictitious example of a social care practitioner and their interaction with a child to illustrate the ideas that have been explored in the preceding sections.

> ***"Get them to feel…erm…very comfortable and happy to kind of converse with yourself. And you can do things like get pens and paper out…you know…if you draw alongside a child or write alongside a child then they're happy to do that, and are often less shy about sharing their feelings. They're still at that age where, you know, feelings are more acceptable to have. By the time they get to twelve, they're often clammed up [laughs] and they often decide that it's not acceptable to be sad. Erm….with eight year olds I've used books…like 'the Big Bag of Worries" and conceptual ideas…erm…playing cards and things like that…truth games.***
>
> ***I think that being able to sit down in a quiet space…and they can keep writing for as long as they want, 'til they find the right [words], rather than feeling that they've got to answer a certain question that I'm asking them right now and they've got to come up with the right answer and the right word [laughs]. And that's working really well."***
>
> (A social worker reflecting on her creative abilities in Dillon, 2019, p.121)

Setting the scene to enable participation

You are planning to visit a ten-year-old child, Jamie, who you have never met before. Drawing on Dillon's (2019) participatory model, and recognising that children cannot give their opinions without some level of truthful information sharing, you plan your visit to include:

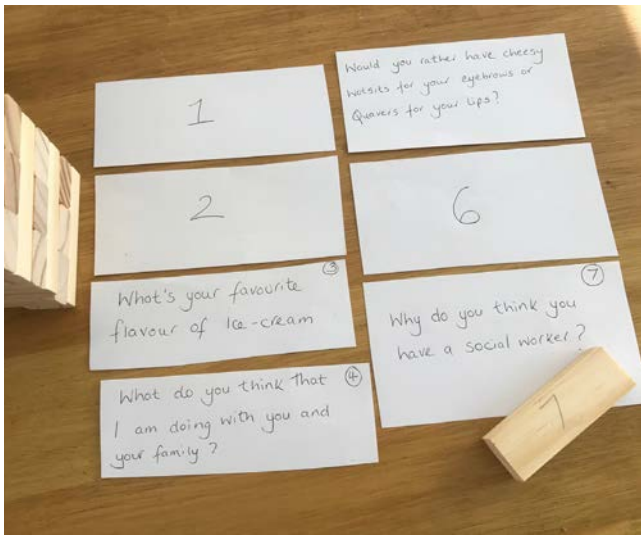
- Who you are, what your role is and why you are visiting.
- How Jamie can contact you outside of your visits, within agreed boundaries.
- How Jamie prefers to communicate.
- How Jamie's opinions can be listened to, understood and responded to (wishes and feelings).
- Jamie's wishes and feelings at the time of your visit.

Who am I and what am I doing?

Introducing yourself to Jamie can be so much more than just saying your name and your job title. Social care practitioners often have lengthy assessments and case notes to read prior to visiting a child and it is inevitable that you learn intimate details about Jamie's private and family life, which creates an imbalance of power.

Smale et al's (1993) Exchange Model encourages social workers to regard the people they work with as experts in their own lives and use the knowledge they bring as an essential component of any assessment. Using this approach with Jamie, you can mutually share information about yourself in order to build connections, find commonalities, increase Jamie's capital and alleviate worry. It also gives you the opportunity to simply play with them.

The explanation about your involvement can be honest yet succinct. Sharing information with Jamie will make them aware of the implications of their questions and answers, and give them the opportunity to respond. You can build on this further as you get to know more about Jamie, their lived experience, and their wishes and feelings. An example of how you might do this is presented below, based on an idea presented by a social worker.



Picture 1: Building a relationship

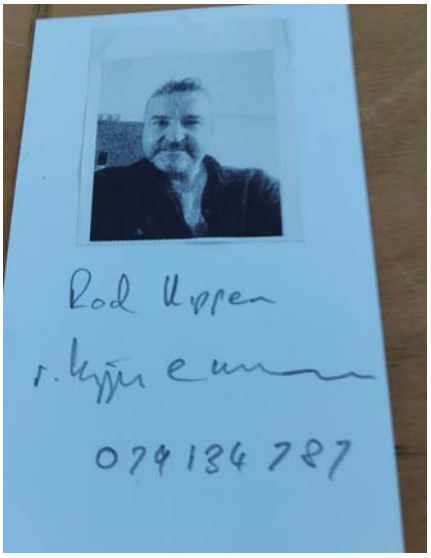
Picture 2: Gathering wishes and feelings

A typical game of Jenga can be adapted in order to build relationships (see picture one) and gather wishes and feelings (picture two). Numbered blocks are scattered throughout the game, each corresponding with a question written on paper, which is face down in front of you. Using pieces of paper instead of writing the question on each block enables you to tailor-make the questions depending on what you would like to discuss with each child on their visit. A mirroring technique enables the child to answer the question first (for example, why do you think you have a social worker?) before allowing you to answer the same question (for example, why do I think you have a social worker?).

How can Jamie get in touch with me?

Social care practitioners often leave their contact details with children's parents or carers, and forget to share these details with children. Letting Jamie know your telephone number, email address and office location offers them a better chance of being able to get in touch with you. This is pertinent in participatory social work, otherwise visits can become a process of 'information extraction' to fit in with our timescales and enquiries. Besides this, Jamie will shortly have a plan designed to safeguard them; the ability to contact the key people within this plan is paramount.

An example of a creative way of doing this using an iPhone printer is provided below. Whilst this may not initially seem to be any different to a pre-printed business card, the child is actively involved as the photograph-taker, the writer of contact details or the artist. A Polaroid camera or iPhone printer could be shared amongst your team, enabling involvement (and creativity) from the outset.



Reflective exercise

Making ourselves available
> Do the children with whom you work know how to get in touch with you?
> If children wanted to share their wishes and feelings with you at this very moment, how could they contact you or document their thoughts?
> Do they know your office location? The creative use of maps (for example digital maps with directions, or printed route planners) can enable children to orientate your place of work in relation to where they live.

How would Jamie like to communicate with me?

Ruch et al. (2017) remind us of the lessons drawn from social pedagogy to build meaningful relationships with children and encourage their participation in their care. The notion of the '*Common Third*' in social pedagogy describes the use of a shared interest, activity or task that is undertaken with the child to build a sense of collaboration and shared endeavor (see, for example, **The Common Third - ThemPra Social Pedagogy**).

Drawing on our principles of participation, Jamie has the right to express their wishes and feelings *in a way that suits them*. You could therefore ask Jamie how they want to be informed and consulted about their child protection planning, taking into account their own cultural preferences and experiences. These creative methods can include (but are not limited to):

- Child-friendly explanations and responses (see below for examples).
- Images and diagrams the child can engage with.
- Collaborative drawings or doodles.
- Video / audio recorded messages - the sending and receiving of voice-notes, for example, may be more accessible and engaging for children than reading.
- Games - whilst all activities must be linked to the interests and communication needs of the child, practitioners can assemble a tool-kit of resources as a starting point.
- Role -play.
- Art / drawings / pen and pad / craft.
- Collages - for example, a 'visual poem', can be constructed using photos found in magazines or leaflets, and choosing a few words.
- Photography.
- Tik Toks.
- Creative work using genograms (see: ***Using genograms in practice*****).**

Ascertaining wishes and feelings

Jamie has the right to give their wishes and feelings regarding the services we are providing and the actions we are taking. At this stage, you have shared information about the reasons for being in their home and supporting their family. You could now check back with Jamie, making sure that they understand our involvement and ensuring they hold enough information on which to base their opinion.

Widely available resources such as **emoji cards** or **Bear Cards**, for example, can be useful in helping a child describe their emotions, but they must be used alongside specific questions that are unique to Jamie and their circumstances. However you capture this information is up to you and Jamie - it could be written, drawn, made, spoken about or even acted out. Consider how you will take this important and precious information away, as in the following example:

"What you have drawn is so important! I would love to show your team. Could I please take a photo?"

Staying connected: The plan and the case conference

It is important to actively connect the child with their plan, as practice that simply elicits the 'views' of children often means that they are not *actively connected* to the measures that adults undertake to keep them safe. This entails walking alongside them, helping them understand the implications of what they wish for, what others propose, how decisions have been reached and checking how plans are working out. This is an integral foundation of all work with the child, and not an extraordinary activity classified under the amorphous umbrella of 'direct work'.

A child protection case conference was held for Jamie, but they did not attend. You are planning your next visit to include:

- An explanation of the plan agreed to safeguard Jamie and promote their wellbeing.
- Jamie's wishes and feelings about their plan.

Child protection conferences are formal meetings and generally produce formal documents. As Jamie's social worker, your explanation of their plan and its actions can be communicated **in a way that suits them**.

In recent years, IROs have begun to write directly to children, to explain their involvement and describe what is taking place (Watts, 2021). Signs of Safety social workers are co-creating 'Words and Pictures' storyboards (Turnell & Essex, 2006) with parents to help children understand their circumstances. However, this practice tool is proposing that you go beyond these ideas, as reading letters or storyboards may not appeal to all children. Bullet-point statements, voice notes, videos, word collages, poems or Haikus (a short poem defined by its precise use of syllables) - what does your individual child need to make their connection?

The post-meeting explanation is often overlooked, as focus tends to be on pre-meeting preparation (Dillon, 2019). Yet, it is this visit that enables the loop of participation to be joined up, informing Jamie about decisions made to keep them safe and the action plan written on their behalf. This visit enables Jamie to be **connected** to their plan and to recognise that changes they see within their home, or to their health and wellbeing, are a result of what is written in their child protection plan.

Jamie then has the right to give their opinions (wishes and feelings) on the child protection plan, a statutory requirement laid out in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2018). Again, Jamie's wishes and feelings can be given and received in a manner that is best for them.

The following example can be used at any stage of working with a child to help them stay connected.

The Beauty of a Box – an example of a creative tool

What boxes do you have lying around your home?

A box can become a meaningful item depending on what we place in it, and who we give permission to look inside. Creating boxes with children can generate many questions:

- What is the box for?
- What will be inside it?
- What is its purpose?
- To whom will it be given?

A box also has a lid that can be closed when you leave. This provides privacy and symbolises the end to your visit.

A box created with Jamie can contain anything that Jamie wants it to: football cards, postcards, collages, pictures and faces from magazines, characters ranging from cars to unicorns. It could be a collection of your joint work, along with a range of stickers, blank paper, postcards and coloured pencils to help Jamie be creative when you are not there.

It could include a simple explanation of decisions made within the child protection conference that Jamie can revisit if they choose to. The decision to place something in Jamie's box is representative of the child's character, or how they felt at that time. It provides a starting point for conversation.

Jamie chose to keep creative materials in their box, along with their 'visual poem' that was completed during a visit with you.

The core group meeting - who are they and what are they doing?

It is almost time for the first core group meeting following the child protection case conference. As part of your visit to Jamie, you plan to share information regarding this meeting, before gathering Jamie's wishes and feelings. Your visit will include:

- The purpose of the core group meeting.
- Who will attend and for what reason.
- Whether Jamie will be going.
- How Jamie's opinions can be listened to, understood and responded to (wishes and feelings) by the people involved.
- Jamie's wishes and feelings today.

Many local authorities utilise pre-prepared booklets to explain child protection case conferences to children, which can be useful. However, it is advisable to move away from the 'one-size-fits-all' approach and instead draw upon Jamie's preferred methods of communication and their interests to create something unique to them.

During the mirroring exercise with Jamie, you learned that Jamie adores football. They love assembling teams of their favourite players and designing new football strips. Jamie has a vivid imagination. When asked how they would like to communicate with you, Jamie said they like 'making stuff'.

As Jamie has the right to be safe, and will be aware of changes happening within their family, the explanation of why the meeting is taking place can be simple. We can now begin to make connections between the presence of a social care practitioner, people meeting together, and the subsequent changes that Jamie may see in their life. Children are often unaware of who their supporting core group of professionals is and the work these professionals are doing to support them (Dillon et al., 2016; Dillon. 2019).

Drawing on Jamie's passion for football, and their desire to 'make stuff', they create the following picture with you.

This is an example created specifically for this practice tool. Jamie drew themselves in the centre of a football field, in charge of the ball. The social care practitioner told Jamie who would be attending their core group meeting, and why. Jamie then added each person to their football field, in a position where they felt they belonged. Mum was put in one goal and their teacher in the other, as Jamie said they were good at helping and could save the ball. Dad is strong and placed in the field, along with the social worker. Further people can be added to Jamie's 'field of defenders' as their presence in the meeting is explained to Jamie.

At this point, we can again ask Jamie's opinion, or wishes and feelings, about actions being taken on their behalf, or services that are being provided for them. The recording of these can be linked to Jamie's preferred method of communication - they do not need to be written in a pre-prescribed booklet. For example, **Mind Of My Own** makes trusted, fully accessible digital participation tools.

The following reflective questions are designed to help you think about children's involvement in decision-making and meetings.

Reflective exercise

Thinking critically and digging deeper
> What is your organisation's guidance on children's involvement in decision-making?
> Do you have a ballpark age range for attending meetings?
> Does this differ for a Child In Need meeting or a child protection case conference?
> Does the child know there are different ways to contribute to discussions and decision-making that are not just about attending meetings and / or talking?
> How do you choose which children attend?
> Is attendance dependent on the child's needs, or the needs of the agency?
> Consider the location - is it accessible? What will Jamie see and hear as they walk through the building?
> Think about the aesthetics of the room through Jamie's eyes. Is it welcoming? Does it smell nice? Are the chairs comfortable? Will there be food and drink?
> What time of the day is the meeting? Will this have an impact on Jamie's ability to join in?
> Where will Jamie sit and who will sit next to them? Can Jamie indicate where all attendees of the conference sit? How will Jamie know who everyone is?
> What can Jamie do during the meeting, when people are not talking / listening to them?
> What is there to gain from a child being present?
> Think of a child you are working with. Whom can you identify as preventing participation in this instance?
> In the case of non-attendance, how can you make practitioners feel Jamie's presence within the room?
> How will you spend time with Jamie after the meeting?

Conclusion

This participatory practice tool has outlined the context, basis and principles upon which social care practitioners can embed participation within their everyday practice with children. The ideas contained within are starting points and suggestions only and it is hoped that these will encourage further development from social care practitioners as they move child and family social work practice towards higher levels of participation.

What is important is thinking past simple verbal conversations and embracing new ways of encouraging children's participation in all aspects of work with them. A forthcoming Practice Tool (Baynes, forthcoming) will continue the discussion about how to ensure that life story work is used creatively to communicate with children and that the stories of their lives are recorded in ways that make sense to them and reflect their experiences.

Final reflections

- Which area of knowledge within this tool has been particularly interesting to you? How can you use this knowledge within your role?
- Is there any part of your practice that you would like to develop further? How can your team manager, or your organisation, help you address further learning opportunities?
- Participation in child and family social work need not rely on 'grand gestures'. What are the small tweaks you can immediately make to your practice to evidence mutual respect and joint action with children?

References

Baynes, P. (forthcoming, 2022). *Life story work with children and young people.* Research in Practice.

Beresford, P. (2021). *Participatory Ideology : From Exclusion to Involvement.* (1st ed.). Policy Press.

Briheim-Crookall, L., Michelmore, O., Baker, C. Oni, O., Taylor, S., & Selwyn, J. (2020). *What Makes Life Good, Care leavers' Views on their Well-being.* Coram Voice: Bright Spots Publications

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2021). *Annual Report 2020: Patterns in practice, key messages and 2021 work programme.* Department for Education.

Cossar, J., Brandon, M., & Jordan, P. (2016). 'You've got to trust her and she's got to trust you': Children's views on participation in the child protection system. *Child & Family Social Work, 21*(1), 103–112. **https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12115**

Department for Education. (2018). *Working together to safeguard children.* HMSO.

Dillon, J. (2019). *'Revolutionizing' participation in child protection proceedings.* Doctoral thesis, Liverpool John Moores University.

Dillon, J. (2021). 'Wishes and Feelings': Misunderstandings and missed opportunities for participation in child protection proceedings. *Child and Family Social Work.* **https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12847**

Dillon, J., Greenop, D., & Hills, M. (2016). Participation in child protection: A small-scale qualitative study. *Qualitative Social Work : QSW : Research and Practice*, 15(1), 70–85. **https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015578946**

Ferguson, H. (2016). What social workers do in performing child protection work: Evidence from research into face-to-face practice. *Child & Family Social Work, 21*(3), 283–294. **https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12142**

Ferguson, H. (2017). How Children Become Invisible in Child Protection Work: Findings from Research into Day-to-Day Social Work Practice. *The British Journal of Social Work, 47*(4), 1007–1023. **https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw065**

Hart, R.A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship.* UNICEF International Child Development Centre.

Hatton, K. (2013). *Social pedagogy in the UK: Theory and practice.* Russell House.

HM Government. (1989). *Children Act.* HMSO.

HM Government. (2004). *Children Act.* HMSO.

HM Government. (2014). *Children and Families Act.* HMSO

HM Government. (2017). *Children and Social Work Act.* HMSO

Laming, W H. (2003). *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry.* HM Government.

Lefevre, M. (2015). Integrating the teaching, learning and assessment of communication with children within the qualifying social work curriculum. *Child and Family Social Work*, 20, 211–222. **https://doi-org.mmu.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/cfs.12071**

Lefevre, M. (2018). *Communicating and engaging with children and young people: Making a difference* (2nd edition). Policy Press.

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal, 33*(6), 927–942. **https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033**

Manful, E., Cudjoe, E., & Abdullah, A. (2020). Towards child-inclusive practices in child protection in Ghana: Perspectives from parents. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 119, 105594. **https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105594**

McCafferty, P. (2017). Implementing Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in Child Protection Decision-Making: A Critical Analysis of the Challenges and Opportunities for Social Work. *Child Care in Practice: Northern Ireland Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Child Care Practice, 23*(4), 327–341. **https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2016.1264368**

Office for Standards in Education. (2021). *Framework, evaluation criteria and inspector guidance for the inspection of local authority children's services.* HM Government.

O'Reilly, L., & Dolan, P. (2016). The Voice of the Child in Social Work Assessments: Age-Appropriate Communication with Children. *The British Journal of Social Work, 46*(5), 1191–1207. **https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcv040**

Rogers, M. (2013). *Daniel Pelka Serious Case Review.* LSCB.

Ruch, G., Winter, K., Morrison, F., Hadfield, M., Hallett, S., & Cree, V. (2019). *Child & Family Social Work, 25*(2), 430– 438. **https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cfs.12699**

Ruch, G., Winter, K., Cree, V., Hallett, S., Morrison, F., & Hadfield, M. (2017). Making meaningful connections: Using insights from social pedagogy in statutory child and family social work practice. *Child & Family Social Work,* 22: 1015– 1023.
doi: 10.1111/cfs.12321

Scott, H. (2021). *Using genograms in practice: Practice Tool.* Research in Practice.
www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2021/february/using-genograms-in-practice-practice-tool-2021

Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & Society, 15*(2), 107–117.
https://doi.org/10.1002/chi.617

Smale, G., Tuson, G., Biehal, N., & Marsh, P. (1993). *Empowerment, assessment, care management and the skilled worker.* HMSO.

Thomas, N. (2007). Towards a Theory of Children's Participation. *The International Journal of Children's Rights, 15*(2), 199–218.

Thomas, N., Crowley, A., Moxon, D., Ridley, J., Street, C., & Joshi, P. (2017). Independent Advocacy for Children and Young People: Developing an Outcomes Framework. *Children & Society, 31*(5), 365–377.
https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12207

Turnell, A., & Edwards, S. (1999). *Signs of safety: A solution and safety oriented approach to child protection.* WW Norton.

Turnell, A., & Essex, S. (2006). *Working with "denied" child abuse: The resolutions approach.* Open University Press.

UN General Assembly. (1989). Convention on the rights of the child.
https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf

Watts, R. (2021). Relationships, Reviews and Recording: Developing Practice for Children in Care. *Practice,* 1-16.

Weld, N., & Greening, M. (2013). Three houses exercise. In Bunn, A (ed.) *Signs of safety in England: An NSPCC commissioned report on the signs of safety model in child protection.* NSPCC Online.

Winter, K., Cree, V., Hallett, S., Hadfield, M., Ruch, G., Morrison, F., & Holland, S. (2017). Exploring Communication between Social Workers, Children and Young People. *The British Journal of Social Work, 47*(5), 1427–1444.
https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw083

Research in Practice
The Granary Dartington Hall
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692
email ask@researchinpractice.org.uk

Authors: Jo Dillon (The University of Sheffield)
Ffion Evans (Manchester Metropolitan University)
Rod Kippen (42nd Street / The Horsfall Gallery, Manchester)

With grateful thanks to:
Leanne Carr, Mel Hills, Sarah Holtom and Rebecca Watts

Cover photo: Jo Dillon

Research in Practice is a programme of The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756 VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall, Totnes TQ9 6EL

ISBN 978-1-911638-81-0