research in practice

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PSDP—Resources and Tools:
Hearing childrens' voices

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Introduction

This learning tool links with the film of Jenny Molloy talking about her experiences as a child, which you can access on the website next to this.

> Please watch the film before working through this learning tool.

In the film Jenny talks about her experiences of having a social worker when she was a child. She describes a social worker who she says 'knew my parents', but who left her feeling that her voice was marginalised.

Despite services being involved and some people having long term relationships with her family and knowing about their problems, she said that there was no one she felt able to tell about what life was really like for her.

The film also describes some of the challenges for children and social workers in building trusting relationships in which children can make disclosures and get the right kind of help. It highlights how certain social work activities, prescribed by law and policy, matter to children, such as seeing their bedrooms and seeing them alone.

This learning tool is designed to help practice supervisors think about what gets in the way of social workers attending to children's experiences, and how you can use supervision discussions to encourage child-centred social work practice in order to make sure children's voices are heard.

You will be asked to think about two new practice models for communicating and working with children and young people, developed from research findings, and to consider Jenny's experiences again in light of these:

> 1. **Talking and Listening to Children**

> 2. **i-Can**

1. Talking and Listening to Children

The Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) research project looked at what communication happens during social work visits and direct work with children across the UK.

The research team concluded that communication between a child and their social worker can be affected by many factors (Winter et al, 2017). They recommend adopting an ecological approach focusing on the interaction between three elements in the system (child / case / context).

The purpose of this is to retain a central focus on the **child** throughout any discussion, planning or ongoing work with them and their family (**case**) and within the wider professional or societal **context**.

The child / case / context approach can be used to articulate some of the tensions and distractions present in the system around a child, and is the basis for the next activity where it is explained further.

Activity one

Follow this link to read a short briefing paper that explains the key feature of the child / case / context model.

The project resulted in the development of the TLC framework, which breaks down direct practice with children into four stages:

1. Getting the mindset right

Preparing for the visit mentally and emotionally including exploring expectations and feelings about it and thinking about what it might be like to be in the child's shoes. At this stage, social workers may identify tensions within their role or values. Here, the focus is on self-reflection to identify the impact of values, ethics and the social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (a model that describes aspects of personal and social identity like gender, geography, race, religion, age, ability, appearance, class, culture, education, ethnicity, employment, sexuality, sexual orientation and spirituality – Burnham, 2013) on how practitioners listen to and work with children.

2. Creating the space

Negotiating barriers in order to make an opportunity for communication with children and hear their voice during the visit. This may mean finding a quiet place within a busy household or school environment, making opportunities and getting consent to spend time with a child alone where there may be other people wanting to speak with you, or physical restrictions that make it challenging to create the necessary safe and confidential space.

3. Communicating with a purpose

Planning child-centred activities with a clear goal in mind to build relationships, gather information and contribute meaningfully to assessments and plans. This aspect of social work necessitates consideration of aspects of the child, case and wider context in order to take account of power relationships, status and perceptions, and individual differences such as age, gender, language or disability. Planning for this aspect of social work practice will include thinking about what play and activities will enhance communication with a particular child, and what can be done to best explain the social worker's role and let the child know it is safe to talk or to broach difficult subjects and move things on where they have become 'stuck'. For children who are pre-verbal or have additional needs, it will also be necessary to think about how to build a relationship so that communication does not over-rely on adults or siblings.

4. Making good endings

Thinking carefully and reflecting on what a good ending looks like, whether it's an individual visit or an entire intervention. Children need to have some warning that the work or visit is ending and an opportunity to sum up what has happened. The worker should thank them for their time and take a moment to plan ahead, including making contact details available should the child want to talk or get help between visits or post-intervention. Planning good endings includes thinking about the reasons for the ending and the emotional impact for the social worker, child and family, which may include a new worker taking over because the previous one is leaving for whatever reason, or because the family situation has changed for better or for worse.

Follow up information for later

You can access videos focusing on what effective communication with children and young people might look like in relation to each stage on the TLC website. These resources could be useful for you and your team if you are not already aware of them.

2. i-Can model

The second practice model 'i-Can' is based on research by Cossar et al (2013). The research project included a team of young researchers and interviewed 30 young people about their experiences of recognising and telling about abuse and their experiences of getting help. The research also analysed an online discussion board where young people were discussing these subjects.

The model developed from this research outlines children's perspectives about factors that enable or prevent them from recognising and telling people about abuse or experiences that they are worried about, and about the effectiveness of the help that they then receive. There are three core components to the model:

> telling

> help

> recognition.

Figure 1: i-Can framework
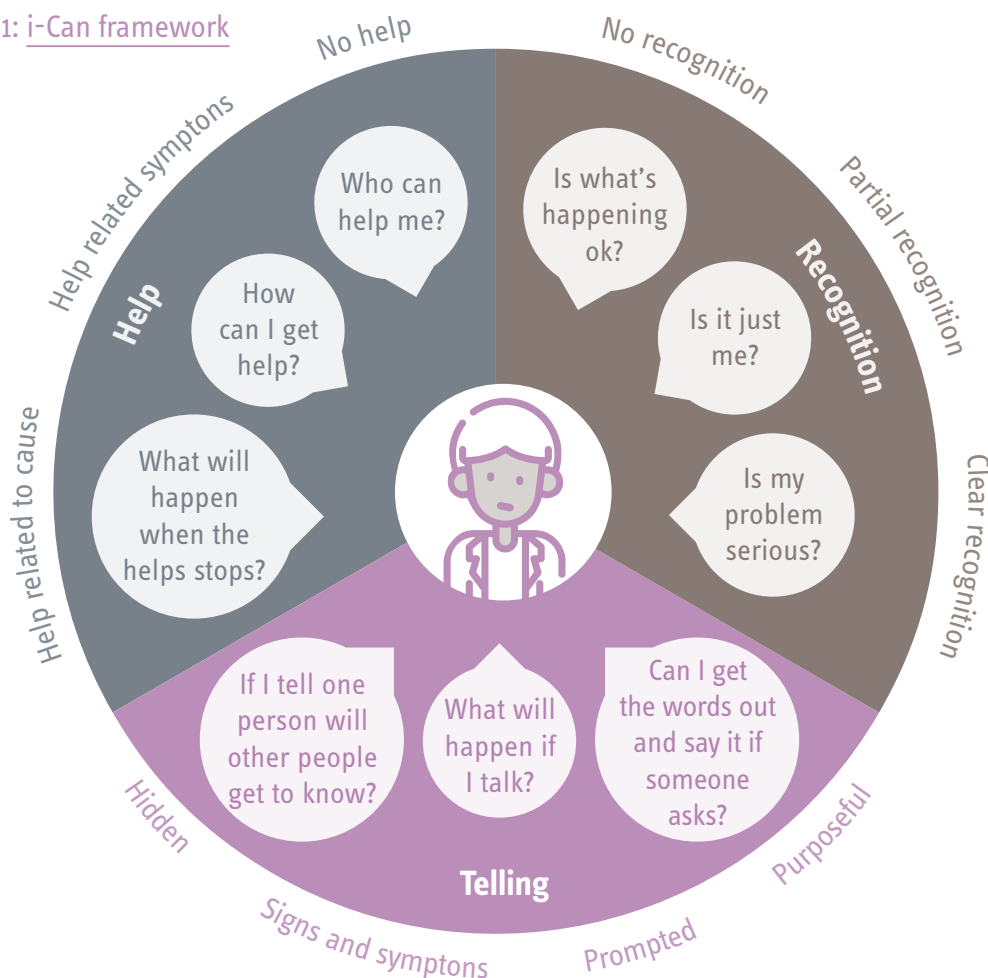
Cossar et al (2013) explain that children need to be able to recognise what is happening to them as harmful or serious to be able to tell people about it. This ability increases with age but, even then, they may decide not to speak up. Instead, their behaviour usually provides clues that adults need to pick up on. Children or young people may hide what they are worried about from their social worker but might tell a trusted person if asked or enabled to. Some children described engaging in a process of weighing up the risks and consequences of telling against any potential benefits.

They also found that some children are very aware of the kind of help that they may be offered. For example, if support is time-limited they worry about what will happen afterwards. Or children may have been offered help with behavioural issues, such as anger or poor conduct at school, rather than the underlying cause.

Activity two

Click on each link to read a short description explaining more about each component of the model:

> telling

> help

> recognition.

Follow up information for later

You can access short videos explaining more about telling, help and recognition on the website, which might be useful for you and your team to watch.

Activity three

Barriers and enablers in Jenny's story

Using the child / case / context model you read about in activity one, please think about what **barriers** and **enablers** Jenny might have experienced as a child in building a relationship with her social worker.

Write down as many as you can, using different colours for barriers and enablers. It might not always be straightforward to decide if something is a barrier or enabler. For example:

> Child – had the same social worker for 2 years (enabler)

> Case – parents very demanding of SW time (barrier)

> Context – summer holidays (barrier?)

What has it been like reflecting on Jenny's experiences?

Please look back at what you have written and spend some time reflecting on this in relation to the children and families you or your team work with. You may find it useful to answer these questions:

> Can you identify anything you will do differently as a practice supervisor as a result of this activity?

> What has listening to Jenny's story caused you to notice about your own work with children and young people (or that of your team members)?

Exploring the voices, views and experiences of children and young people in supervision

A number of prompt questions are provided below for you to use in supervision discussions with your team. The questions are inspired by TLC and i-Can models. They are designed to promote purposeful exploration in supervision about how to communicate with children and young people and ensure that their voices, views and experiences are a central part of any social work involvement:

> What barriers might the child face in being able to speak out and how can social workers support children to overcome these barriers? How might experiences of powerlessness or marginalisation impact on the ability of children to speak out?

> Where might there have been opportunities to create space for the child to talk to someone sooner?

> What distractions are there when going out to visit children at home or at school?

> How do you create a 'safe space' within your visits to children?

> How are you positioned by the parents / carers / other professionals within the team around the child? How does this affect your responses to the child?

> How do you balance the needs of the parents / wider family alongside the needs of the individual child?

> How do you prepare for your visits and what tools and activities do you find useful? What games do you play with children? Do you play with children and their parents together? What purposes do these activities serve?

> If the child was here now, what would they tell you is important to them? What would the child say is the reason you are involved in their family? What would they say you do? Do they think you are helping? Who for? Do they think they need help?

> What is the dominant narrative about this family? Where does it come from and how does it affect your relationship with the child and attitudes to safety vs risk? What is the child's perspective? Does the help offered address the cause of the problem or just the symptoms?

> How many social workers have the children had before? Were they helpful? Do they know how long you will be involved for or when you will next visit? How will you end your involvement? Will there still be help when you leave today or stop working with them?

> How does your particular social work context / role affect your interactions with the children you work with?

Other ways you can use this tool

The activities in this tool can be adapted to use individually with supervisees or as a group activity for training and team development, focusing on direct practice with children and young people. The resources we have highlighted under 'further information for follow up later' could be included within this.

We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.

References

Burnham J (2013) 'Developments in Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS: visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced' in Krause I (ed.) *Cultural Reflexivity* London: Karnac.

Cossar J, Brandon M, Bailey S, Belderson P, Biggart L and Sharpe D (2013) 'It takes a lot to build trust' *Recognition and Telling: Developing Earlier Routes to Help for Children and Young People.* London: Office of the Children's Commissioner

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. Available online: www.doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw083