

Chapter 22 - Taking Looked After Children's Views Into Account On A Day-to-Day Level: The Perceptions And Experiences Of Children And Social Workers
By Children In Scotland

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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The children interviewed for the research were asked whether they thought their social workers knew how they felt about things, how their social workers found this out from them, and what this is like for them. They were also asked how the social worker responded when they (the children) expressed their feelings and views.

The experience of communicating feelings and views to social workers

Most of the children felt that their social workers knew how they were feeling about things. ... Two main factors affected the children's experience of talking to their social workers about how they were feeling, and how able they felt to do this. These were:

The topic: several children described the topic as key to their experience of talking to their social workers about their feelings. They found it much easier to talk about positive feelings or more prosaic issues than about negative feelings or emotive issues.

The nature and quality of their relationship with the social worker: namely, the time and quality of attention that the social worker gave them, and the extent to which their feelings and views were being responded to.

Regular, individual attention from the social worker was valued, for example:

Interviewer: How does [your social worker] know how you're feeling about things?

Eleven year old child: Well, she always comes to see me. She always comes to visit me. And makes sure that... she knows how I'm feeling.

For some children, doing enjoyable things with the social worker was an important part of feeling that they had the social worker's full attention and that they were valued. One had enjoyed being taken to the beach and was already looking forward to the next outing, whilst another enjoyed being taken out to lunch.

Unsurprisingly, where a child liked their social worker and felt that he or she genuinely cared, it was much easier to talk about feelings. For example:

Interviewer: So how does [your social worker] know how you're feeling about things?

Twelve year old child: 'Cause I like my social worker and when she comes up, well, I just think she's a really nice social worker. 'Cause she's genuine and I feel I can be relaxed with her, and genuine, as well. And she's just – a friend, as well. Like, if I had a friend like that I would talk to them about things.

Conversely, where contact with the social worker was uncertain, or where the child did not feel that the social worker valued his or her feelings, the children found it more difficult to talk to him or her. Some children had issues they wanted to talk about with their social workers, but reported that they hadn't seen the social worker for a while and were not sure exactly when they would see her.

Another found his social worker unapproachable, feeling that she was not paying attention when he spoke to her, and was sometimes grumpy and dismissive of his feelings. He also did not trust that what he said to her would remain confidential. He was the only child to raise concerns about confidentiality in this context.

...Another key factor in the willingness of the children to talk to the social worker about how they were feeling was the extent to which their views were being taken into account, whether by the social worker or in a general sense. ... Some children described their social workers as sorting things out or supporting them with difficulties, and this gave them confidence that the social worker would respond to any issues they raised. Conversely, another child was angry that his wishes regarding contact with his father were not being fulfilled and saw little point in discussing his feelings with his social worker since the social worker was already well aware of his views about contact. He did not direct his anger towards, and did not appear to blame, his social worker, but this issue eclipsed all others in terms of its importance to him and he therefore felt there was little to talk about with the social worker.

As might be expected, high quality relationships, in which children found it easiest to talk to the social worker and found him or her responsive to their feelings and views, tended to be characterised by a combination of the closely related features outlined above – regular, individual attention, liking the social worker and feeling him or her to be caring and responsive. Conversely, talking about feelings was found to be most difficult where the relationship was lacking in these qualities.

The experience of social workers' response to feelings and views

Most of the children had a sense of how the social worker responded to their feelings and views, but two found it difficult to say. This difference did not seem to be age-related – rather it seemed that these children did not have a strong sense of themselves as having feelings and views that might call for a response. They did have things to say to the social worker, but they did not express, and did not appear to have, specific hopes or expectations about how the social worker would respond to them. The impression of the interviewer was that they would not express feelings and views unless this was prompted, and given careful attention, by the social worker.

As explained previously, one child said that he did not normally talk to his social worker about his feelings and views. Amongst those children who *were* willing to talk to their social workers about their feelings and views, a range of factors impacted on their experiences of the social worker's response. These were:

- the extent of opportunities to talk to the social worker
- the extent to which the child's wishes were fulfilled
- the social worker's handling of the situation
- the issues at stake
- the relationship with the social worker

Some situations were difficult for the children by their very nature, but the findings from the interviews indicate that there was scope within inherently difficult situations for the social worker to respond to children's feelings and views in a way that could impact positively or negatively on the child's experience.

Children gave examples of a range of responses that they had found helpful. Some of these related to situations in which it was not possible to fix a problem easily, or to respond to feelings and views in a straightforward way, and where the social worker's response had mitigated its effects on them. For example, one child was glad that, after his mother had missed their contact session, his social worker had passed on information to her about how he and his sister were getting on. Another child had been seriously ill with anorexia and had not initially wanted to be admitted to hospital, despite the risk to her health. Although her social worker had been instrumental in ensuring she was admitted, and this child believed her opinions had not been as valued then as they now were, she appreciated that during this time her social worker still had regular sessions with her and talked to her. The quality of her relationship with the social worker was very good and this was a key factor in her sense that the social worker responded positively to her feelings and views.

Other responses that the children had found helpful were:

- Explaining and/or reassuring: for example, one child had found a sibling's behaviour difficult and his social worker had explained why this might be happening and reassured him that it was likely to be temporary.
- Passing on information or concerns to relevant others: for example, some children said 29 that their social workers feed in their views at Looked After Children (LAC) Review meetings. Another said that her social worker tells the nurses at the day unit she attends when she is unhappy about aspects of her care there.
- Fixing or helping with difficulties or requests: for example, one child valued the help she received from her social worker with managing difficult emotions. Another said that her social worker would be responsive to arranging more contact with her grandmother if she (the child) asked for this.

As explained above, two children had issues they wanted to talk about with their social workers but reported that they hadn't seen the social worker for a while and were not sure exactly when they would see her. Another eleven-year-old child found it difficult to remember what he had said to his social worker because of the length of time since her last visit. Two of these children did not express unhappiness about this, and these were the same children who appeared to have very limited expectations concerning the social worker's response to their feelings and views. The other found it problematic, saying that it was difficult to talk to her social worker "when she's, like, busy or that, and I really want to talk to her." She described an occasion when a foster carer had telephoned the social worker on her behalf and been told that the social worker might be available in the afternoon – however, when she (the child) had called back in the afternoon, the social worker had not been there. It seemed that she had found this difficult.

For some children, issues inherent to the situation – their conflicting feelings, their distress at being removed from home – contributed to the experience of aspects of the social worker's response as negative. One child had told his social worker that he wanted to get on better with his parents, and he said that the social worker's response to this had been to remove him from home and place him with foster carers. He believed that this had helped to achieve this wish and made things much better. On the other hand, he wanted to go home to be with his parents, and this was upsetting for him. Inevitably, therefore, he had mixed feelings about the social worker's response to his feelings and views.

In the case of another child, however, his distress about not being allowed to see a parent was compounded by the way in which the social worker had handled the situation. He experienced the social worker as dismissive of his feelings and had gained the impression from her that he was partly responsible for the situation:

I just says that... I didn't want to go into foster care and that I wanted to go and live with my dad. She just says, well, she just says that you've got to – you've got to just – behave more, and that it's not up to her, and I've got to bring it up at one of the meetings. (Ten year old child)

As can be seen from some of these examples, the social worker's response to the children's feelings and views occurred in the context of the relationship with the social worker. Where the social worker's response was experienced as most helpful, the relationship was a positive one, characterised by regular, individual attention, liking the social worker, and feeling him or her to be caring and willing to respond to feelings and views. Where it was experienced as least helpful, the relationship was experienced as the opposite.

SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Social workers' views about consulting children aged eight to twelve and the methods used

...All the social workers interviewed expressed strong commitment to the principle of consulting children about their care. They believed that it was important to find a way to consult children that was appropriate to their age and understanding..... All reported that they asked questions and talked to the child about how things are and how the child was feeling. Some emphasised that the way in which this was done was important: one said that talking in the context of doing fun things such as playing or artwork helpfully took the focus away from the child; she found that children experienced this as less threatening than being asked a series of questions. Some found play, including role play, useful for finding out children's feelings and views and one used conversations generated by story books (about animals leaving their mother to go to a different family, for example), as well as life story work, and specific work on aspects of the child's past, to elicit feelings and views.

However, another social worker felt that using particular tools to consult children had the potential to put pressure on them, in a situation in which they were already subject to a considerable degree of (perhaps unwanted) attention from a range of adults. He said that children often "build a wall around their emotions" and he found that a subtle approach to finding out feelings and views was required; he believed a good relationship between the child and the social worker, and a situation in which the child felt comfortable, was essential:

Getting alongside them in their own environment and their own interests, and then not asking questions for some time, and you can get the odd little gem [about how they feel] thrown in on a random car journey at some point in the future... you could get one significant sentence... in a 2 or 3 hour contact. It's not subterfuge... but I think it's a point at which you have a bond.

Another social worker also found that children talked to her in the car.

When asked how she found out children's feelings and views, one social worker described asking questions about how children were feeling about things to try to help them understand the situation and the reasons for decisions such as being removed from home:

'How did you feel about that then?', 'Are you still feeling like that now?' ... rounding it up at the end.

She acknowledged that this could be at odds with eliciting their feelings and views:

Usually the children end up agreeing... I've got to be careful about that because it's easy to railroad children.

This illustrates the challenges for social workers of handling a situation in which it is not possible to fulfil children's views. ... It suggests that it is important for social workers to be clear whether the purpose of their questions is to help to *explain* a difficult situation to a child with *reference* to the child's feelings and views, or to elicit the child's feelings and views about the situation (even where the child's wishes cannot necessarily be fulfilled).

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How social workers judge the weight to be given to children's views

In explaining how they judge how much weight to give to children's views, the social workers referred to a range of considerations. One simply said that her approach was to try to fulfil a child's wishes unless these were not in the child's best interests, and unsurprisingly, this was a key consideration for all the social workers. One placed emphasis on assessing the child's level of understanding of the situation, while for another a primary consideration was establishing the veracity of what the child said. The other social worker referred to all of these considerations: assessing whether it is in a child's best interests to fulfil his or her wishes, assessing the child's level of understanding of the situations, and being able to verify what a child has said.

Where social workers referred to verifying a child's views, they said they used their knowledge of the child and the situation. One referred to using sources of information such as the child's behaviour, or other adults involved in the child's life, to try to establish the truth of what was being said.

Key reasons given by social workers for *not* fulfilling a child's views were:

- Fulfilling their views would put them at risk. This concerned issues such as contact and whether the child could return home.
- The child's wishes were unrealistic – one social worker gave examples of a child wanting a horse, or wanting to buy his mother a house.
- A lack of appropriate resources – some social workers referred to a lack of foster carers which meant that there was little scope to respond to children's wishes concerning foster carers and which generated uncertainty and insecurity for them. ... One social worker also saw a lack of resources as preventing the fulfilment of a child's wish to change social worker or to change his or her school or guidance teacher.

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Views and best interests as one and the same?

In some examples given by social workers there were indications that, when it came to establishing a child's views by observing his or her behaviour, no clear distinction was being made between the

child's views and the child's best interests. These examples concerned young children whose observed needs were defined as their views. One social worker said that the success of this depended on how able the children were to react to situations – this is more difficult where children have become withdrawn as a result of their experiences.

This “blurring” of the definitions of children's view and best interests, as interpreted by the social worker, is a reflection of the fact that the two are closely linked. However, the fact that while a child's views and best interests may coincide, they may also differ, suggests that eliciting feelings and views may be helped if social workers make distinctions between:

- The directly expressed view of the child and the social worker's interpretation of the child's view based on observation
- The social worker's interpretation of the child's view and the social worker's judgement of what is in the child's best interests.

This would seem to be particularly salient in the case of younger children and those with additional needs, where particular skills are required to consult effectively and where observation may play a greater role in discerning feelings and best interests. The balance between the use of direct and indirect methods to obtain children's feelings and views, and whether this balance is appropriate to the child, is also a relevant consideration here.

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