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***“She made you feel like there’s hope*”: Gaining a better understanding of how children negotiate their relationships with social workers from their own accounts**

**Abstract**

Recent years have seen a re-emergence of international interest in relationship-based social work. This article uses children’s accounts of their relationships with social workers to build on previous research to promote children’s safety and wellbeing. Interviews were undertaken with 111 children aged 6-18 years old across ten different local authorities in England, as part of the evaluation of MTM’s Signs of Safety pilots within the Department for Education’s Children’s Social Care Innovation Programme. The interviews reveal four key findings: that children look for care and reciprocity in their relationships with social workers and this can be achieved through listening and small acts of kindness; that they are adept at recognising aspects of social workers’ verbal and non-verbal communications which indicate to the child whether they are listening and interested in them; that there are times in which children are particularly vulnerable especially if parents are resistant to engagement or children’s trust is broken; and that children actively use their agency to control their communication and engagement. The article concludes by highlighting children’s relational resilience and the importance of ensuring opportunities for children to develop new relationships with social workers when previous relationships have broken down.

**Keywords: child protection; children and families; social work and sociology; vulnerability**

**Introduction**

For social workers, a major challenge of working with children has been the huge increase in statutory intervention in England over the last decade (Hood et al., 2020) with the consequential rise in caseloads and the associated recording requirements that were already at concerning levels (Baginsky et al., 2010). Munro’s review (2010; 2011) of child protection in England highlighted a need to move away from bureaucratic processes and procedures to allow time for social workers to do direct work, support in doing this and opportunities for reflection so they can engage in relational practice with children and families. Consequently, there is increasing interest in ways of working that emphasise relationship approaches within practice, reflected in several of the larger English Innovation Programme’s projects (Sebba *et al.*, 2017) including the evaluation of Signs of Safety (SoS). SoS is a strengths-based approach to child protection casework, originating from Western Australia that was developed in the late 1980s and 1990s. The Munro, Turnell and Murphy (MTM) Child Protection Consultancy was awarded funding from the Department for Education to investigate the feasibility of introducing and implementing SoS across 10 Children’s social care departments in England. We were commissioned to provide an external evaluation of this development and, as part of this, children’s views were sought about the use of social work tools and how they understood and negotiated their relationships with social workers.

Until recently most research about children’s relationships with social workers has come either from adult perspectives (Morrison *et al.*, 2019) or from studies that examined children’s experiences more broadly, for example that explored child protection processes or experiences of being ‘looked after’ by the state (Leeson 2007; McLeod 2008; Buckley *et al.,* 2011; Cossar *et al.,* 2011; Cossar *et al.,* 2013; Jobe and Gorin, 2013; Devaney *et al.,* 2019). These studies show the importance of consistent and trusting relationships with a professional to help children disclose abuse and neglect, as well as to support engagement with Children’s social care services. In a study of children in long-term care in Ireland, relationships, communication, and social support were found to be the factors most linked to permanence and stability with continuity highlighted (Devaney *et al.*, 2019). Research findings about the types of social work support required by children have been consistent. A focussed review of the evidence reported children wanted social work support that is: “flexible; responsive; individualised/ personalised; respectful of children’s views and wishes and participative” (Oliver, 2010, p.8). Stabler *et al.*, (2020) found no archetypal ‘good worker’ but concluded that important core skills, that include collaboration, empathy and reflective listening, need to be adapted to meet the needs of individual children at different times within the context of specific relationships. Several researchers have highlighted the importance of a child-centred approach that utilises age appropriate communication, including playful or creative techniques to engage children (Whincup, 2015; O’Reilly and Dolan, 2016).

Recently, research has been undertaken to examine children’s communication with social workers in more detail and from their perspectives. The Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) project has looked at how 126 children and young people, aged 0-17 years old interacted with their social workers during social work visits (Morrison, 2016; Winter *et al.,* 2017; Morrison *et al.,* 2019). They found: that social workers mainly engaged well with children but some seemed unwilling to communicate except through talking and few brought play materials; that structural, practice-related and personal factors could all constrain social workers’ ability to communicate well; that children’s understandings of the visits’ purposes varied and could be influenced by parents; and that all encounters were unique to the individuals involved, meaning there was no ‘quick fix’ for better communication. The project also highlighted that children’s vulnerability may sit alongside their ability for agency (Morrison *et al.,* 2019). In Morrison *et al.* (2019), Klocker’s (2007) concept of the ‘thin’ or ‘thick’ agency continuum is discussed in relation to the amount of agency children can exert. Thin agency consisted of decisions and actions carried out in highly restrictive contexts with few viable alternatives, while thick agency encompassed room to act, with a broad range of options. Unsurprisingly children in their study were only able to exert ‘thin agency’ within the confines of relationships with social workers. Munford and Sanders (2015) describe the concept of ‘bounded agency’ that recognises that agency is ‘socially situated’ and emerges from ‘processes of reflection, compromise and negotiation’ as young people who face adverse circumstances and live in impoverished environments seek to have some voice and control within limited options and resources. The ﬁndings of their longitudinal study on vulnerable young people’s transitions to adulthood in New Zealand indicated the importance of social workers’ ability to develop meaningful relationships with vulnerable young people and, in doing so, support them to enact agency in positive ways. Young people needed to be able to make sense of their circumstances, exert a level of control over them and thus develop their own pathways. Young people talked of ‘critical moments’ in their lives, for example when they formed a relationship with an adult who opened up opportunities for them to positively ‘act on their world’. A review of literature on young people’s transitions to adulthood who have experiences of trauma, marginalisation and involvement in the public care system has also highlighted the importance of supportive connections with others (peers as well as adults) (Sapiro and Ward, 2019). Their review draws attention to previous conceptualisations of marginalised young people that have used a deficit approach, focussed primarily on seeing their life experiences in terms of the risks and vulnerabilities they face. They highlight the need for more understanding about the ways in which children develop ‘relational resilience’, using relationships to engender mutual growth, support and empowerment. We return to these concepts in the discussion, but now turn to the methods and findings of our study.

**Methods**

The evaluation team worked with pilots in ten local authorities to identify families who met the three criteria for inclusion in the study. These were: 1) they had been referred to Children’s social care services within the preceding three months; 2) the referral included concerns about neglect; 3) the family had previously been referred within the past 12 months. Families were removed from the sample only if the parents/carers did not have the capacity to give their informed consent; social workers did not consider the family members were sufficiently resilient to participate; or other extenuating circumstances meant participation was not advisable. The social worker for each family gave them a background information sheet about the study and explained that a researcher would visit twice, with a six-month interval. Families were given the opportunity to opt out of the research and consent was obtained from children and their parents. We explained the study to children in an age-appropriate manner and consent was viewed as a continual process (Wendler and Rackoff, 2002; Gorin *et al.*, 2008). Ethical approval was obtained from the King's College London's University Research Ethics Committee (For further information about interviews with parents see Baginsky et al., 2017; 2020). Children over the age of six were asked to take part in short semi-structured interviews (these varied in length with most about half an hour). The interviews were audio-recorded but if a child or parent did not want this to happen, notes were taken. Most children were interviewed alone but sometimes parents or siblings wanted to be present or were there because there was no other suitable room.

Data were managed using qualitative data analysis software (NVivo) and followed the Framework analysis method (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Following a process of data familiarisation, a coding framework was developed based on patterns of recurring themes that arose in the data, for example, codes for positive and negative feelings were broken down into sub-themes such as a lack of care, children not feeling listened to, or feelings being misinterpreted. Themes were analysed to look for patterns and associations and these were then interpreted, making close linkages within the data. Data were analysed by two researchers allowing for a process of checking and verification; any divergent views were debated by the wider research team.

The research had various limitations and challenges as well as strengths. Firstly, gatekeeping is a barrier whenever researchers’ access to study participants is made via an organisation, particularly if the topic is sensitive (Johnson, 2018). Our recruitment of families relied on social workers identifying them and, even though inclusion criteria were in place, social workers may have exercised their discretion in terms of which families to invite. Secondly, we were unable to interview all children on both occasions. Research with families who are in the process of experiencing statutory intervention in their lives is difficult (Gorin *et al.*, 2008) and re-engaging families a second time, despite extensive efforts on the part of the researchers, proved impossible in some cases. Thirdly, the power differential between children and parents, and children and researchers must be acknowledged. As some parents were present for children’s interviews, it is hard to know how frank children were able to be. In all interviews with children we endeavoured to address the power differential, by providing children with choices and control over small aspects of interviews, for example turning the voice recorder on/off, however we cannot be sure how much difference this made to what children felt able to say. Fourthly, the study was undertaken across ten local authorities. The evaluation core team was supplemented by a team of interviewers, all of whom were experienced but inevitably their different style, personality and ability to develop rapport will have had some influence on the interviews. To reduce the risk of variation the interviewers and core team met on several occasions to discuss the methodology, use of tools and interview techniques.

*The sample*

At Time 1 (T1) we interviewed 111 children in 95 families. Not all the interviews resulted in usable data, so this article is based on interviews with 100 children in 87 families. A total of 52 children in 87 families were re-interviewed at Time 2 (T2).

Table 1 summarises the age and gender of the reference child in each family (data for one reference child is missing, n=86). Siblings in some families participated in interviews but data were only collected on the reference child. Most children interviewed were aged 6-10 years and there were more girls than boys.

**Table 1: Demographic background of reference child when first interviewed**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Number | % |
| Age Group |  |  |
| 6-10 | 43 | 50 |
| 11-16 | 27 | 31 |
| 16+ | 16 | 19 |
| Gender |  |  |
| Girl | 54 | 63 |
| Boy | 32 | 37 |
| *Base n* | *86\**  (\*data for one child missing) | *100* |

**Findings**

The findings are organised by examining children’s accounts of their relationships with social workers and what was important to them about their relationships; children’s views of social workers’ communication with them as this was fundamental to developing a relationship; perceptions of barriers to developing relationships and positive communication; and examples of how these barriers were overcome in the development of new relationships.

*Children’s relationships with their social worker*

Almost all children we interviewed were aware they had a social worker and had some form of understanding about why a social worker was working with their family. They were most likely to talk about the social worker’s role as being there to help their family and/or keep them safe. Most children saw the social worker approximately every two weeks, usually at home. Several children said that the social worker only talked to their parents or that their contact with the social worker was very limited.

Most children had positive feelings about their relationship with their social worker, with many describing them as someone with whom they could talk and who would listen to them. Children used adjectives such as “*friendly*”, “*kind*” and *“helpful*” to describe their social workers. There were various examples of social workers providing practical advice and support to children, such as trying to help them find ways to relax and teaching them how to manage conflict and/or their own behaviour. Children reported that social workers had found a variety of ways to engage with them, such as reading and drawing with them, playing board-games and football. Some social workers used games or, in one case, puppets, to help children answer difficult questions. Younger children particularly enjoyed engaging with their social worker through play and fun activities. Playing gave children space to enjoy something with the social worker that was not serious or difficult for them, helping to build trust and (from their perspective) friendship.

Children’s accounts of their relationships showed that it was important to them to feel valued and cared for by the social worker. Several children recounted examples of social workers doing something that involved additional effort for them, for example, an 11-year-old boy talked about his social worker driving him to a school disco that was some distance from his home. Feelings that relationships were reciprocal also made children feel valued. One child explained that her social worker had started working with her during training and they had built up a relationship together:

*“I don’t know, I just... when we first met her she was, like, a student and, like, we feel like we’ve got to know each other and we’ve helped each other and now she’s like an old big social worker, she’s all official now. She’s got lots more work to do and she hasn’t paid less attention to us; she’s still treated us the same, which is nice.”*

(Area 7, T1, Girl aged 16+)

The sentiment that they had ‘helped each other’ meant that she felt she had something to offer the social worker in the relationship, which helped address the power imbalance in the service user/social worker relationship, as well as the child/adult one. One 14-year-old girl described her relationship with her social worker as ‘awkward’. The social worker wanted the girl to talk about her own life, but sharing of personal information was not reciprocal:

*“They tell you their name, and they tell you how old they are, or they might not, but that’s it, really; that’s all you know about them and they expect you to tell them everything about how you feel and all that, and it doesn’t really work like that because, as soon as you meet someone, you don’t tell them everything you know, do you? You don’t tell them everything that’s happened in your life; you have to get to know them first.”*

(Area 5, T1, Girl aged 11-16)

Many children spoke about trust and this young person articulated the importance of developing a consistent relationship over time with a social worker to develop and maintain that trust.

*Communication within relationships*

Children’s accounts highlighted a variety of positive and negative verbal and non-verbal communication with their social worker.The extent to which children engaged with the social worker depended on several variables, including whether they liked the way the social worker communicated with them and their families’ previous (good or bad) experiences with social workers.

The children’s accounts showed how social workers were using a variety of non-verbal communication methods and tools to build relationships with children. Within SoS there are specific direct work tools that are designed to be used with children and parents to facilitate their voices being heard in the assessment. The Three Houses tool is the one most used with children. It consists of a drawing of three houses which help individuals and families describe and explore what is happening in their lives, specifically in relation to danger and harm, safety factors, and hopes and dreams (Weld, 2008). We found the tool was mostly used with younger children, although there were a few examples of its use with teenagers. It was recorded as being used in 43 cases. Of these 26 children were positive about it, 6 were neutral/ambivalent, and 11 were negative. The main benefit as far as children were concerned was its perceived value in allowing children to ‘open up’ to the social worker, to be able express their worries and hopes in a way that felt less intense for some children:

*“Sometimes it’s nice to have a break in talking, so you can write things down, because sometimes people don’t always like to talk.”*

(Area 5, T1, Boy aged 6-10)

The reasons children gave for not liking the use of the tool included a preference for just talking, a dislike of feeling forced into sharing information they did not want to share with the worker, struggling to discuss or confront their feelings especially relating to the ‘future’, and being asked to repeat the same activity when they had a new social worker.

Whilst these tools helped some children communicate with social workers, children’s accounts described not only picking up on *what* the worker said to them, but also *how* they said it. For example, children who felt their social worker listened to them said they knew this because the social worker responded with appropriate questions, answered the child, or s/he went quiet when the child was talking. However, the non-verbal cues children picked up on were not always positive. One child described the social worker as “*staring into space*”, another child said the social worker *“kept going* (talking) *over me”,* and another described knowing the social worker was not listening because she was reading paperwork and became distracted by the child’s other siblings. Not feeling listened to, was the most frequent criticism children made of social workers. Several children felt upset by social workers taking notes whilst talking to them or talking to them briefly before moving on to a sibling. All these behaviours communicated to the child a lack of care and respect.

Communication also failed in the eyes of some children because social workers did not ask the right questions, kept asking the same questions or misunderstood what the child meant. In several instances a child said that a social worker misrepresented their feelings to family members which had damaged their relationships with their parent/carer. Children’s narratives were also less positive when they felt they had communicated their wishes and these were either not recognised or acted upon. One eight-year-old boy talked about moving into foster care when he had wanted to stay with his aunt. He was distressed by being placed with white rather than black foster carers when the rationale and the possible length of the placement had not been discussed with him. Subsequently another social worker took over the case and gained his trust, through clear and open communication with the child that helped him to understand the plan that had been put in place.

Communication with social workers was at times deliberately controlled by some children. A pregnant 16-year-old, whose own mother’s young children were the subject of child protection plans for neglect, felt totally disengaged from her social worker. She described her social worker by saying “*They just talk and talk and talk and talk and talk. Just ramble on*.” She also talked about how she would tell the social worker something, and the social worker would try to interpret what had been said by repeating it back, but in so doing showed that she had misunderstood the essence. Her frustration was compounded by disengagement arising from the family’s previous negative experiences with different social workers and health professionals. While her ability for agency was limited, she managed to maintain some control through restricting her own communication. Whilst she was ostensibly co-operating with the social worker because she knew she had no other option, she avoided any unnecessary engagement, such as not undertaking ‘homework’ set by the social worker.

Other children exercised agency in terms of whom they spoke to about what subjects. Some children said they did not want to talk to anyone about their feelings; others that they just wanted to talk to parents, or that they actively chose *what* they wanted to tell the social worker and avoided or withheld information*.* In some cases, they decided what to share based on the sensitivity of the information or the level of confidentiality they would be afforded. One child described how a lack of confidentiality led her to shut down the lines of communication with her social worker:

*“I used to be really open with her, and then, like, after knowing my information is being passed around and not really being confidential, I stopped telling her everything.”*

(Area 3, Girl aged 11-16)

For some children there was a difference between feeling that the social worker would listen to them and actively wanting to confide in them. This distinction is important because some children, whilst not disliking their social worker, still did not see him or her as a potential confidante.

*Obstacles to development of relationships with children*

In talking through their narratives, children often felt aggrieved by actions taken against their parents/carers and this had an impact on their relationships with social workers. This was particularly the case when there was suspected abuse or neglect and children were removed from their homes (for example, the eight-year-old boy referred to above) or had siblings removed. One young person spoke in detail about the process of having a sibling removed from the home, in her view unnecessarily (as she did not believe her mother to have done anything wrong). In this case the young person did not feel the social worker was supportive of her, her mother or her remaining siblings. Children in these circumstances talked very defensively about parents/carers and were understandably sensitive to the ways in which social workers communicated concerns. The following example highlights the difficult position children can often be placed in:

*Child: “James [brother - name changed] was starting to walk, he bumped into something and there was a mark on his head, she (social worker) asked mum and mum gave her answer, then she was whispering to me, asking me”.*

*Interviewer: “And how did that make you feel?”*

*Child: “I don’t think she should have been whispering to me. She should believe my mum.”*

(Area 5, T1, Girl aged 6-10)

This child described how she subsequently refused to engage with the social worker. In some interviews, the reason for children’s disengagement from social workers was unclear. For example, one child described how a social worker had promised to bring her a book, but on the next visit she had forgotten it. In this case it was difficult to tell if her daughter’s decision not to engage with the social worker related to the forgotten book or was more broadly influenced by the mother’s dislike of the social worker. Either way the mother made it clear the child would not engage with social workers again. This highlighted both the power imbalance that existed between the child and the mother, and the child’s vulnerability and lack of agency in this context. Recovering relationships with children after issues such as these is a clear challenge for social workers. Children may feel disloyal or even fearful of parents if they do engage with workers. In such situations it is possible to see how children can become silenced.

Children’s accounts highlighted a sophisticated understanding of the obstacles that social workers face in being able to develop meaningful relationships with children. One young person spoke about his social worker wanting to spend more time visiting children but could not do so because of pressures associated with paperwork and administrative tasks. Another young person saw high caseloads as a barrier to building relationships:

*“They might think they know you, but they don’t know what makes you smile, what makes you laugh and what makes you upset and what makes you angry and they don’t really know your personality….but in a way you can’t, because they have so many other children they have to deal with.”*

(Area 5, T1, Girl aged 10-16)

The frequent change of social workers that some children experienced meant they could feel they were having to repeat painful and difficult experiences. This could result in a loss of trust and disengagement when children felt that they could not, or did not want to, put themselves through the process of getting to know a new worker:

*“We’re getting a new one soon because she’s leaving. Oh, my God. One stays, one goes, we get nicer ones, they come and go; oh, my God, I can’t stand it.”*

(Area 4, T1, Boy aged 11-16)

Practicalities, such as the infrequency of social work visits, could act as a barrier to the development of relationships and the disclosure of important information. One child spoke about not feeling the time was ‘right’ on one occasion to disclose information, but two weeks later at the next visit, wanting to confide but not being able to because she was not alone with the social worker. In such situations a child’s concerns may be left unspoken.

*Developing relationships with new workers following negative experiences*

Some children who had previous poor experiences went on to have more positive experiences with a different social worker or social care professional. Given that we visited children twice it was not unusual for children to discuss different social workers/professionals with whom they were involved and to find that children preferred one above another. Several children who had experienced difficulties with their social workers on the first visit had gone on to form a good relationship with another by the second visit, largely as a result of the way in which the social worker communicated with them. A child who had a prior poor experience described her new social worker as being “completely different”. When asked how the new social worker was different, she said:

*“She made you feel like there’s hope. She’s working for the positive.”*

This young person talked about what she meant by this. She said:

*“She’s made us feel comfortable. She put more effort in because she actually cares. Not, this is easier for me, I’ll do it this way. She’ll do it the right way, if you know what I mean” (Area 2, T1, Girl aged 16+)*

The sense that the social worker cared, was positive, and was explaining and following due procedure in this case was particularly important to the young person whose family had struggled to get the support they needed.

Another child had a very negative view of her social worker. Despite actively resisting engagement with the social worker, she had a different view of a family support worker:

*“All the other social workers, they gabble and gabble and gabble, they just want information out of you. Eliza [name changed], she don't do that. She just says, well, we don't want information, we just want to know about stuff what was making you happy and sad…. I wanted to go back to that place and do it again.”*

(Area 5, T1, Girl aged 6-10)

This seemed to be due to the approach of the family support worker, who was able to spent time to engage the child in a fun activity and develop a relationship with her.

**Discussion**

The article set out to explore the ways in which children negotiate their relationships with social workers from their own accounts. In doing so, four key themes emerged that are examined in turn; the importance of care and reciprocity; the centrality of ensuring positive verbal and non-verbal communication; the vulnerability and potential invisibility of children; and children’s ability to control and exercise agency in their relationships with social workers. These four key findings can be seen within a socio-ecological perspective that recognises the complex interplay between child level factors, such as the extent of their ability or confidence to communicate their worries; the influence of their microsystem (for example the influence that parents have on children and to whom they talk), the exo-system (including contact with their social workers and the opportunities they have to support children) and the wider macro system that includes the impact of structural disadvantage, such as poverty and racism on their lives. Devaney *et al.,* (2019) in their study emphasise the importance of practitioners who work with children ensuring they do not have a linear focus on the child’s micro system but bear in mind the multi-layered interactions and connections within the wider network and environment. Winter *et al*., (2017) have highlighted that children’s relationships with social workers exist within a specific context and encounters between children and social workers are unique to those individuals and the space and time they inhabit. The children in our sample were either the subject of Child Protection Plans or were ‘Children in Need’ as categorised in England’s child protection system and the Children Act (1989). Their experiences were often of living in poor housing and communities, within families that were frequently chaotic, unstable, and financially insecure. Many of these children and young people had multiple professionals involved in their families’ lives and had seen many social workers come and go. Despite the differences in children’s individual characteristics, personalities, and experiences, many expressed the desire to feel cared about and valued by their social worker. This could be communicated to children through listening to them and small practical gestures. Whincup’s doctoral research with children (2015) highlighted the importance of small but significant gestures which are part of the construction and maintenance of relationships; gestures which are performed through direct work and which convey a message to the child that their concerns and preferences are remembered and important. In their research with young men, Featherstone *et al.,* (2017) also found that feeling cared for and being shown care was what they valued in relationships with social workers. Conversely, small oversights on the part of the social worker in this study could indicate to children a lack of care and this could quickly jeopardise relationships with children who were weary of being let down. Linked to showing care was reciprocity, either through sharing of information or showing of care for each other that went some way to make relationships feel bi-directional and help address the power differential sensed by some young people. Providing opportunities for children to experience reciprocity, autonomy and agency in their relationships may help to support them in dealing with traumatic experiences and foster the desire for greater connection with others, providing a foundation for future trusting relationships (Sapiro and Ward, 2019).

Positive verbal and non-verbal communication between children and their social workers was central to the development of relationships. Children were adept at reading non-verbal cues and whilst these could be used to positive effect, behaviour such as making notes whilst talking to children could signify a lack of interest that children could find upsetting. Children’s disengagement came about for reasons that have been highlighted in previous research (e.g. Gorin and Jobe, 2013), for example, the level of confidentiality had not been made clear, or where their feelings had been misrepresented, or their wishes had not been acted upon. Neither did they engage if they did not feel listened to (or understood) or changes in social worker meant repeating information about painful experiences. Understanding and managing children’s expectations around confidentiality whilst developing a trusting relationship with them requires skill, expertise and training. Lack of practitioner confidence, inexperience in communicating and playing with children and a lack of the individual skills necessary to relate to people and act creatively have been identified as barriers to the development of good quality relationships (Ruch, 2014; Ferguson, 2016a; Winter *et al.,* 2017). This may be related to insufficient preparation for this work. Lefevre (2015) identified inadequate training and a lack of opportunities for statutory (involving child protection) placement experience with children on social work qualifying courses which may be rectified by England’s new social work regulator that started in 2020. Others (for example, Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016) have argued that the lack of opportunities for professional reflection in many workplaces militates against practitioners developing a deeper understanding of children’s views and experiences.

Children’s vulnerability was highlighted within different circumstances and contexts within the study. The interviews revealed that a few children were not talked to away from their parents or were only seen for very short amounts of time. Ferguson (2017) suggested that children may become ‘invisible’ to the very professionals with whom they should have a relationship and reported that time spent with children separately from parents may be inadequate, with the norm in his study being five to 15 minutes and the shortest two minutes. Even if children are seen for longer periods, it may still be a very short timeframe in the wider context of the child’s life. Vulnerability of children was also highlighted through feeling unable to confide in workers, or not having a worker that they felt they wanted to confide. It may also be that they were not in touch with their social workers at the times when it was needed. For example, one child in our study spoke about the social work visit not coinciding with times when she felt ready or able to discuss her concerns. Ruch (2014) considered children’s communication to be organic and evolutionary and concluded that social workers could find communication with children ‘uncomfortable’ because the ways in which children communicated did not fit with the linear demands of statutory social work, such as adhering to strict timeframes and formal procedures.

Children’s accounts highlight the fragility of relationships with social workers, which may also leave them vulnerable. A few children considered social work involvement had made their lives worse and not better, and some said that they would not like or talk to any social worker. Social workers need to manage complex and, at times, hostile situations with parents, while attempting to maintain the trust and engagement of the child. In such situations, children may feel compelled to support parents out of loyalty, uncertainty or fear, leaving them in a vulnerable position. When social workers do not feel children are able talk openly with them, particularly in those families with hostile parents, they need to ensure that the child has someone they trust who is close to hand or that they meet with children away from the child’s home. The importance of understanding the child's existing support network in attempts to protect them from harm was emphasised by Cossar *et al.,* (2011).

Many children had used their own agency either through restricting what they said to social workers or by their actions. Consistent with Morrison *et al.*’s (2019) research, some children had resisted social workers’ attempts to engage them or actively evaded lines of questioning, making it harder for social workers to develop a relationship. For most children, their options were extremely limited as they were all acting with what Klocker (2007) refers to as ‘thin’ agency. While some degree of agency existed, it was about trying to assert some control or redress the power differential between themselves and adults. Communicating openly and honestly with children and providing a degree of control where possible gave children the feeling of greater empowerment.

An important message from our study is that if children did not get on with one social worker, it did not mean they would not engage with other social workers or social care professionals. This illustrated children’s ‘relational resilience’ (Sapiro and Ward, 2019) and demonstrated the strength of children to go on to form new attachments with social workers who had different approaches to engagement and communication. In circumstances in which connections between children and their workers have ruptured, it may be appropriate to provide the opportunity for children to change social worker or to introduce a new professional to the child, such as a family support worker, to prevent the risk of them becoming invisible or out of reach.

**Conclusion**

This analysis has reiterated many familiar themes in research with children where there is social work involvement. Children looked for social workers whom they could trust and who supported them and their families to help resolve their difficulties. It also confirmed the importance of effective and positive verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as the building of positive relationships with children. In trying to dig deeper into children’s accounts it has highlighted the sophistication children possess in analysing the behaviour of others and moderating and controlling their own use of agency. However, alongside this we see how certain situations that occur within social work practice may place children in a vulnerable position. The way in which some parents influence children’s accounts, may render children less visible to professionals. The fragility of children’s relationships with social workers, compared with the long-standing (good or bad) relationships children may have with their parents or wider family, was apparent. Nonetheless, the ability of children to develop better relationships, even after previous difficulties with social workers, suggests the need to encourage the development of new relationships in situations in which previous relationships seem irretrievable.

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