**How to ... undertake direct work with children**

**Introduction**

This is a brief guide to give you some ideas and links to different resources that may help you to develop positive relationships with the children and young people you work with. This will help you to gain understanding of their wishes and feelings and ensure that the voice of the child remains central to your work. It is beyond the scope of this guide to look at all the types of situations you may encounter when undertaking direct work with children and young people but the type of activities you choose to undertake are limited only by your own imagination!

The most important things to remember when undertaking direct work with children and young people are to ensure that they feel able to communicate with you in a way that they feel comfortable with, their wishes and feelings are recorded and documented accurately, and that you manage their expectations effectively.

**Initial contact**

The majority of the time you first meet a child or young person is likely to be in the family home/in school and in the presence of others. This is a good time to explain to the child and the parent/carer what your involvement will be and how often you will see them and where.

**Relationship building**

As with all social work, building relationships with the children and young people you are working with is key and, depending on their age and previous experiences, it may take some time for you to build an effective working relationship. This can be frustrating, especially when you only have a short period of time to get to know the child. However, it is important that you can manage your own feelings and don’t let this impact on your time with them as this will only have a further negative impact on your ability to build a relationship with them.

An essential part of relationship building with children and young people is getting to know things such as their likes and dislikes as this can help you tailor the activities you undertake with the child or young person. In addition, it is important to be aware of any learning needs of the child and their level of educational attainment as this will help you ensure that any activities or worksheets you plan to use are age appropriate and within the level of understanding of the child you are working with.

**Planning direct work**

*Plan*

Each plan will be different and will very much depend on the circumstances surrounding the direct work. Here are some things you may wish to consider when planning direct work sessions. This list is not exhaustive but aims to give you an idea of things to think about.

* What is the aim of direct work with this child/young person?
* How many sessions will you have? For example, if you are completing an assessment for court and have a deadline how many sessions can you realistically complete and write up in the timescale?
* Where will you be seeing the child/young person?
* How long will the sessions last?
* What are their likes/dislikes and their level of ability?
* What resources are available to you?

*Consent*

When planning direct work sessions it is important to gain consent from parents/carers. In some cases this will be very easy and will require nothing more than an explanation to the parent/carer about what you want to do and why; however, it is important to be ready to deal with negative responses. For example, be clear about the legislation you are working with the family under and whether this means you must see the child alone as part of statutory requirements or whether they are working with you voluntarily. You should discuss the issues of consent with your practice supervisor before undertaking any direct work with children to ensure you are working within your organisation’s policies and procedures and for advice and support on how to respond if a parent/carer does not wish to provide consent.

*Contract*

Your organisation may require you to have a ‘contract’ for undertaking direct work with child/young person; however, if they do not, it is good practice to do so as a ‘contract’ outlines the relationship between you and the child/young person and is helpful in managing expectations and explaining the work you are doing and why.

Any contract should be age appropriate. For example, a contract for direct work with a 5-year-old will be very different to a contract for working with a 15-year-old. Make use of pictures and drawings, include things like the time, day and place you will meet, how long you will meet for, what type of things you will do, what is expected (for example, ‘no shouting’), and what they can expect from you (for example, patience; you won’t make them do anything they don’t want to do). You should also include what level of confidentiality they can expect – this is likely to vary depending on the circumstances, what the aim of the direct work is and the nature of your discussions. It is important that you are clear about this and can respond openly and honestly to any questions you may be asked about this.

*Activities*

The type of activities you undertake with children and young people are likely to depend on the circumstances of the direct work and will be affected by things such as timescales, age, level of ability and their understanding of (1) why children's social care are involved with their family, (2) where you are undertaking the direct work sessions and (3) your ability to engage and connect with the child/young person you’re working with.

Direct work sessions with a teenager may involve going for a coffee and a game of pool whereas a direct work session with a five-year-old is more likely to involve meeting in the family home or school and playing games or undertaking craft activities.

*Direct work toolkit*

Some local authorities will have their own resource libraries which may include things like worksheets, parallel stories, books which explore feelings and toys or games. However, you may find it helpful to build up you own toolkit of resources which you can use when working with children.

There are many online resources which provide free worksheets and ideas for direct work with children, some examples include [Sheffkids](http://www.sheffkids.co.uk/adultssite/pages/communicrateworksheets.html), [CAFCASS](https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/leaflets-resources/our-work-with-children.aspx), Children’s Workforce Development Council [report](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/518/1/Children_s_views_and_experiences_of_contact_with_social_workers_report_July_2010.pdf), the College of Social Work [Learning Materials Module 7](http://www.tcsw.org.uk/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/Social_Work_Practice/RtSW%20Module%207%20Communication%20FINAL.pdf) and Community Care Online [Social work tools for direct work with children.](http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2011/11/07/social-work-tools-for-direct-work-with-children-drawing/)

In building up a toolkit you need to think about the sort of things you might need, the age-appropriateness of your resources and how you can utilise your resources in as many situations as possible.

Basic items for direct work toolkit include:

* Paper/drawing pad
* Felt pens/pencil crayons/crayons
* Craft materials, e.g. coloured card, glitter glue, pictures cut out of magazines
* Stickers/shaped post it notes
* Safety scissors
* Finger puppets
* Toy cars
* Children’s playing cards – snap/matching games/happy families cards
* Building bricks/stacking toys
* Soft toys
* Soft ball

*Recording*

You need to think about how you will record these sessions, whether it will be by using the pictures/drawings/items you have created (for example, scanning pictures in and attaching electronic versions to the child’s file or taking photos of an item or scene the child/young person created during the session and including these in your report). Sessions with teenagers may be more likely to rely on verbal communication so make sure you either take notes during the session (if appropriate) or as soon after the session as possible to ensure you do not forget what has been discussed. This is especially important if you are gathering information and evidence which may influence the child’s future (if in relation to, for example, contact with families or where a child will reside).

*Analysis*

It is important to note that when recording the wishes and feelings of children and young people and capturing the ‘voice of the child’ that you should do this as accurately as possible; however, this does not mean that once the information is recorded your role is complete. As a professional, you will be required to analyse and interpret the information you gather during direct work sessions using your professional knowledge and resources. It is important to try not to incorporate your own feelings and what you *think* the child/young person might have meant so always try to be aware of your own feelings and what you think is going on and make time for reflecting on direct work sessions to help you in developing your analytical and interpretative skills.