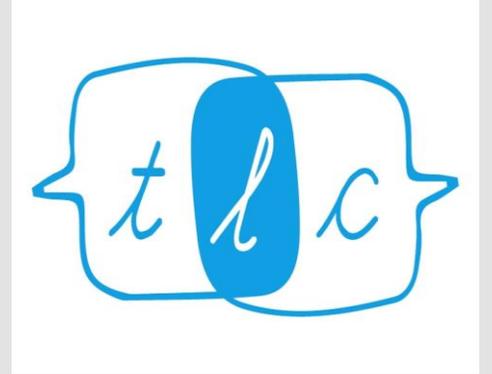


Talking and Listening to Children: (TLC project) Exploring how social workers communicate with children



Professor Viv Cree
The University of
Edinburgh

viv.cree@ed.ac.uk

fiona.morrison@ed.ac.uk

Background

- Repeated evidence from Inquiry reports and Serious Case Reviews that children are not seen and heard sufficiently
- Yet everyone agrees that communication with children is critically important!
- So why isn't this happening, and what can we do to improve the situation for children, their parents and social workers?
- Some research already, but it tends to be focused on what social workers say, not what they do
- Some evidence too about skills/training gaps
- Hence the TLC project was devised...

Research questions

- What are social workers observed to do when they communicate with children & young people in a range of settings and with a range of aims?
- How do practitioners experience and understand their communication with a child or young person?
- How do children & young people experience and understand their relationship with social workers?
- What factors best facilitate communication between social work practitioners and children & young people?

The research project

- ESRC funded, 4 countries of the UK
- Qualitative, 'practice-near' methodology using ethnographic & innovative video-based methods
- 3 phases:
 - Phase 1: participant observation in 8 team rooms (6-8 weeks each) across the UK and observation of 82 visits with children & young people
 - Phase 2: Video-stimulated recall interviews with 10 pairs of children and their social workers in 3 settings
 - Phase 3: Development of training materials for practitioners
- We are now completing Phase 3, but already in Phase 4 – an impact accelerator project!

Broad findings

- 3 kinds of evidence emerging:
 - About the context in which social work is practised across the UK
 - About the profession – how social workers feel about their work
 - About communication with children & young people – what works and what gets in the way of good communication

How social workers build relationships in practice

A Practice Scenario - Case 13, Site B

Ellen is 17 years old and has a learning disability.

She has been living with her current foster carers, Jean & Jim, for 9 years. They have now said they want to retire and so planning has begun as to where Ellen will live.

Ellen's social worker has been off sick for some time so the case has been allocated to another social worker, John. He is now meeting Ellen and her foster carers for the first time.

Let's take a moment to reflect – what are your expectations going into a situation like this? What might the challenges be?

Setting boundaries and creating space

- *John is met by Jean who is highly critical of Ellen. Ellen is upstairs in her bedroom while this is happening. John asks if Ellen is going to come down to see him. He asks Jean if she will get her. She says 'yes' and goes on to say, 'She (Ellen) lost it with me – language and everything.'* **John says, 'I'll ask her when I see her.'**
- *John gets up and follows Jean. **They both go upstairs to get Ellen.** John asks her, 'Are you coming down?' they all come downstairs together and Jean goes into the kitchen.*
- *John says, 'Today is just really to say hello and next week I could meet you in town. **Did Jean explain why I was coming?**' Ellen nods. John explains that he has to plan where Ellen is going to live next. He says, '**The best way for me to do that is to meet you. I've not done one before. Does that make sense?** Ellen smiles and says '**Yeah**'. John says it should take a couple of weeks – '**we'll take it easy.**'*

Being interested and using humour

- *John goes on to ask Ellen how she is doing. She replies 'good'. He asks her about the camp she has just returned from. They chat about the things she did when she was there.*
- *He asks her, 'how many children were there?' She replies, 'Lots. 99 children.' John asks 'Were they all sleeping in tents?' Ellen says, 'no a wooden house. It was freezing.' John asks what the weather was like. Ellen tells him 'it was really snowy'. John jokes, 'You didn't get a tan then!'*
- *He asks her about what else she did when she was away. Ellen talks about listening to her iPod. Ellen asks her about the music she likes and jokes about what is on his iPod.*

Having difficult conversations

- *John goes on to say, 'It will be a big change, moving. How do you feel?' Ellen says, 'OK'. John says 'I'd feel nervous. What would you like to do?' Ellen says, 'Go with my sister.' John asks if Ellen's sister lives in the same town. Ellen says she does. John asks how old her sister is. Ellen replies that she is 20. He asks if her sister has any children. Ellen says, 'Yeah two. They got taken away. Social work won't let me stay with her.' John asks why. Ellen says because of her sister's drinking. John says, 'So if she gets upset or is drinking then staying with her might not be a good idea.'*

Helping children to articulate their feelings & to have some control

- *John says to Ellen , 'Everything's a bit scary just now. I know, it's all a bit scary. We'll do things one bit at a time. It will be OK. When I started as a social worker I was scared and Fiona [the researcher] was scared when she started working with me too.'*
- *John says to Ellen, 'We will go and tell Jean & Jim the plan for next week, we'll tell them the score.' John and Ellen then go out to the garden and tell them the plan for next week. After a few minutes, they all return to the living room and we say our goodbyes and leave.*

Key messages from TLC project

- Communication between children, young people and their social workers is framed by the complex context in which it takes place
- Social workers need to use their skills sensitively and creatively to make spaces for communication with children and young people
- The relationship between children, young people and their social workers is more important than communication itself; a good relationship will forgive a poor communicative encounter

Publications so far

- Winter, K., Cree, V.E., Ruch, G., Hallett, S., Hadfield, M., Morrison, F., 'Effective communication between social workers and children and young people', *British Journal of Social Work*, First published online: July 15, 2016, doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcwo83
- Ruch, G., Winter, K., Cree, V.E., Hallett, S., Hadfield, M., Morrison, F., 'Making meaningful connections: insights from social pedagogy for statutory social work practice', *Child & Family Social Work* (accepted 18 August 2016)
- Briefing paper 1: Effective communication between social workers and children and young people
- Briefing paper 2: Making meaningful connections: insights from social pedagogy for statutory social work practice
- Website & blog:
http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/research/grants_and_projects/current_projects/revisiting_child_protection_in_scotland

Acknowledgements

- With thanks to all the families and children, local authority social work managers and practitioners who supported this project and gave us access to their lives and work
- Thanks to our funder (ESRC) and universities
- And thank you for your attention!