Children and Families' Involvement in Social Work Decision Making

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This review summarises the research literature on children’s and parents’ involvement in social work decision making, which is regarded, in policy terms, as increasingly important. In practice, however, it tends to be messy, difficult and compromised. Different individuals or groups may have different understandings of participation and related concepts, while differences of age and disability also mediate effective user engagement. The literature highlights common themes in effective participatory practice with both children and their parents. Central to this are the establishment of relationships of trust and respect, clear communication and information and appropriate support to participate. © 2011 The Author(s). Children & Society © 2011 National Children’s Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.

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Introduction

In recent years, UK public services have seen a growth of interest in involving service users in decision making. Initially driven by service-user movements, expectations of involvement are increasingly incorporated in policy, being framed, variously, as service-user engagement, user involvement, consultation, participation and, increasingly, personalisation. This agenda is not straightforward; rights-based discourses of participation can elide and become confused with managerial and consumerist discourses (Pinkney, 2011). It becomes yet more problematic in social work when the basis for client involvement is often involuntary. (see Literature Review 1 http://www.socialwork.ed.ac.uk/esla for more detail on the different understandings, history and politics of these ideas in social work).

This review focuses on children and families involved in the social work process. Its scope includes families involved in the child protection system, looked after children and their parents and children with disabilities and their parents.

It is important to recognise that children and parents are not homogeneous groups. Differences of age, race, culture and ability can be significant, and have implications for user involvement. For example, Franklin and Sloper (2009) suggest that disabled children may benefit from a flexible understanding of what counts as participation, with professionals working at whatever level of involvement an individual can achieve. Participation in early years settings (see Davies and Artaraz, 2009) will require different techniques to participatory working in, for example, throughcare or aftercare planning with young people leaving the care system. Wright and others (2006) emphasise the importance of an inclusive approach to participation. They point out that seldom-heard users, such as disabled children, are often those subject to the highest levels of social care intervention; therefore their involvement in decision making ought to be a priority.
In this review we use the terms ‘participation’, ‘user involvement’ and ‘user engagement’ interchangeably to signify any attempt to enable service users to influence social work decision-making processes. In child and family social work with involuntary clients this includes formal processes, such as involvement in child protection case conferences or legal fora. However, it also encompasses everyday practices of listening to, and taking into account, the views of children and parents about social work interventions. Much of the research reviewed examines small-scale participation, where efforts are made for families to influence decisions that will affect them. However, we also include within our definition larger scale processes, where service users affect planning, development and delivery of services at a strategic level.

The remainder of the review is divided into two sections, dealing with user engagement with children and parents respectively.

**Children and young people’s involvement in social work decision making**

The overall picture that emerges from much of the research is that at an ideological level, children’s involvement in social work decision making is increasingly seen as important in the UK and beyond. Nevertheless, many children and young people report negative experiences of such involvement, suggesting that participatory practice tends to be more messy, difficult and compromised than the policy rhetoric might suggest (Bell, 2002; Tisdall and Davis, 2004; McLeod, 2006, 2007; Franklin and Sloper, 2006, 2009).

The impact of the growth in participatory initiatives in social work are not always clear and questions are raised as to whether participation primarily serves the needs of welfare organisations or really empowers young people to shape the services they receive (Gunn, 2008). Gunn (2008) and Sinclair (2004) draw attention to the difficulties of achieving meaningful participatory practice within bureaucratic, hierarchical organisations.

Wright and others (2006) argue that agreement among those involved about what participation means is essential for its success. This is not always the case. McLeod (2006), for example, showed that while social workers reported making extensive efforts to listen to children and enable their participation, few young people felt that their views had been heard and taken into account. She suggests that young people tend to understand listening to include acting in response to what has been heard. The young people to whom she spoke wanted to see that their views influenced social workers’ actions. They understood listening as a practice that would result in greater autonomy for them. The social workers, however, tended to understand listening as a receptive attitude involving respect, openness and attentiveness. McLeod concludes that the two groups valued different social work principles: the young people sought autonomy, self-determination and empowerment, while the workers emphasised respect and empathy.

Vis and Thomas (2009), in their study of children’s participation in Norwegian childcare and protection services, found that merely consulting with children was not sufficient to ensure their participation in decision making. The researchers defined participation as a case in which (i) the child had some understanding of what was going on and had expressed views about the decision and (ii) the child’s views had affected the decision, as reported by the case manager. Of 43 cases where managers reported talking to children to facilitate their participation in decision making, only around half were found to meet both criteria. In 15 cases,
the child had understood what was going on and expressed a view but this did not affect the decision.

These findings suggest that if children’s participation is to be enabled in a way that they themselves recognise, social workers need to give higher priority to ensuring that their views are not merely listened to but taken seriously and acted upon where possible. This approach may be both controversial and problematic. It may have substantial and unrealistic resource implications. It may also create conflicts with statutory social workers’ legal and professional duties, particularly in risk-averse professional cultures. Leeson (2007) notes:

There is an anxiety to protect children from making mistakes, from making the wrong decisions. This fits with the nature of current social work practice being risk-averse, but leads to serious questions about why children are being denied the right to make mistakes, draw their own conclusions and learn, or even to have the right to change their minds. (p. 274)

Similarly, Munro (2001) points out that, given the poor outcomes for looked-after children, ‘humility about our ability to know what is in the child’s best interests seems to be the appropriate emotion’ (p. 134).

Wright and others (2006) emphasise the importance of a whole-system approach to children’s participation. They suggest that this can be understood in terms of four related elements:

- culture: the ethos of an organisation, shared by all staff and service users, which demonstrates a commitment to participation;
- structure: planning, development and resourcing of participation in an organisation’s infrastructures;
- practice: ways of working, methods for involvement, skills and knowledge which enable children and young people to become involved;
- review: monitoring and evaluation systems which enable an organisation to evidence change affected by children and young people’s participation.

Within this overall framework, we now consider what might be entailed in terms of social workers’ everyday activities.

The importance of good relationships

The research suggests, unsurprisingly, that good, long-term relationships with social workers are crucial to children’s involvement in decision making.

In an overview of research on children’s participation in child protection processes, Schofield and Thoburn (1996) suggest that a trusting relationship with a dependable, skilled, professional helper is crucial. This may be a social worker, but in some cases an independent advocate will be better able to fulfil this role (Munro, 2001). They also suggest that the early stages of social work involvement appear to be vital for establishing participative relationships with children. Leaving engagement until a case conference is unlikely to enable meaningful participation. These findings are echoed strongly by Thomas (2002), Bell (2002), Cashmore (2002) and Halvorsen (2009). Thoburn and others (1995) also found that participation was more likely where a supportive relationship with the parents had been established.
A number of studies have highlighted that continuity of relationships is important for looked-after children, but that frequent changes of social worker are common (Munro, 2001; Bell, 2002; Cashmore, 2002; McLeod, 2007, 2010). Such changes appear to be resented by young people: workers were felt to change too often, were rarely available when called, were slow to return calls and did not follow through on requests and promises (Cashmore, 2002). Young people and social workers report having insufficient time to build good relationships: ‘Clearly, achieving a constructive relationship with some teenagers is the work of many months, or even years, and will not easily be achieved in a regime where brief interventions are the norm’ (McLeod, 2007, 2010; p. 285). Tregeagle and Mason (2008) emphasise the importance of long-term relationships for children’s involvement in decision making: ‘For the most part, a sense of being listened to, and having views “taken into account”, resulted from a period of getting to know the worker’ (p. 396). Franklin and Sloper (2009) found that many disabled children felt they had limited contact and rapport with social workers, and that this hindered participation. High staff turnover was again noted as a further barrier to participation. Similarly, Mitchell and Burgess (2009) review of literature on working with families affected by parental substance misuse identifies the need for a patient approach in developing trust and relationships with children and young people.

Winter (2009) found that inconsistency, instability and unreliability act as barriers to social workers developing relationships with young children in care. Social workers in her study felt that the building of relationships had to be structured around statutory task requirements and was often ‘crowded out’ by these tasks. Social workers’ attitudes and beliefs about the competency and understanding of young children also hindered the development of relationships. Similarly, Shemmings (2000) concluded that professionals’ ‘intransigent attitudinal positions’ concerning the age at which children should make decisions and attend child protection conferences, acted as barriers to empowering models of participation. This would support Pinkney’s (2011) claims that psychologically informed developmentalism remains a powerful influence over the nature and extent of participation.

Overall, it appears that there is a need for greater continuity of relationship if children are to have more positive experiences of engagement with social work services. These findings resonate with a resurgent interest in relationship based social work practice more generally (Ruch and others, 2010). The Scottish Executive’s (2004) charter on child protection highlights the importance of professionals getting to know children, developing relationships of trust, respect and consistency. These findings are echoed elsewhere (Elsley, 2008; Whitehead and others, 2009). The importance of continuity and stability is also a recurring theme in the literature on looked after children in residential care (e.g. Happer and others, 2006; Elsley, 2008). Holland (2009) and Halvorsen (2009) argue that everyday acts of care are more important than formal standards statements and procedural requirements in how children experience care.

Participation may also support the efficacy of interventions. Vis and others (2011) reviewed research on the health effects of participation for looked after children, concluding that successful participation may have a number of beneficial effects including improved safety and well-being. This effect was not automatic but related to a child’s relationship with their social worker and the ‘child-friendliness’ of processes.
**Information and communication**

Schofield and Thoburn (1996) suggest that various studies identify the importance of clear information and explanation of what is happening and why decisions have been made at all stages of the process of engaging with children, a view supported by Cashmore's (2002) review of international research on this issue. Thomas (2002) found explanation to be particularly important when the outcomes were against the child’s wishes. Franklin and Sloper (2009) highlight the importance, when working with disabled children, of clarity about the objectives, processes and possible outcomes of participation and of providing feedback about the results of the process. Similarly, Healy and Darlington’s (2009) research with Australian social work practitioners found that transparency was a crucial component of children’s effective involvement. Practitioners recognised the importance of being open and honest about the purpose and process of child protection interventions. Woolfson and others (2010) small Scottish study found that similar components were important in promoting children’s involvement in child protection processes and reducing their feelings of fear.

McGhee (2004) reviewed research on Children’s Hearings, the Scottish system of childcare and juvenile justice, noting that effective communication is identified by various studies as a critical factor in enabling participation. Similarly, Creegan and others (2006) indicate that children’s participation in Hearings can be facilitated by the provision of accessible papers, preparation and discussion beforehand and the provision of clear explanations. It should be noted, however, that the provision of information might also hinder participation where that information is inaccessible or excessive. Creegan and others (2006) note that the use of language and terminology not understood by young people was reported to inhibit participation. Similarly, Whitehead and others (2009) found that the papers sent to children prior to Hearings intimidated some children. They claimed that (i) there was too much information, much of which the young people felt was not relevant to them, (ii) the information went into too much detail about their parents’ histories and (iii) the information focussed on the views of social workers rather than those of the young people or their families. Instead, children and young people wanted clear and simple information about their rights and about the process of the Children’s Hearing.

**Support to participate**

The need for support and training, both for children and staff, is a common theme in the literature on participation (Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Wright and others, 2006; Franklin and Sloper, 2009). Thoburn and others (1995) found a positive correlation between participation and advice having been given to the young person. Thomas (2002) suggests that children feel better able to contribute to decision-making processes if they have been prepared, informed and are supported through the process. He found that children needed particular support when they had something negative to express, and that this might include an adult speaking on their behalf.

Healy and Darlington (2009) suggest that successful participation involves encouraging and supporting children to express their views, for example in family group meetings. In their research, practitioners also emphasised that the techniques used had to be appropriate to the child’s needs based on age and maturity. For many practitioners, this included the use of activities such as play, storytelling and creative arts. These findings are echoed elsewhere (e.g. Scottish Executive, 2004; Wright and others, 2006). Winter (2010) employed a variety
of creative arts methods in her interviews with 4- to 7-year-olds in care, finding that they were able to express their perspectives and discuss sensitive subjects without showing adverse affects.

Independent advocacy may be useful in enabling children to participate in case conferences, (Elsley, 2010). Advocacy can also play an important role in the Children’s Hearings system. Research on government-funded legal representation for young people involved in Hearings (Ormston and Marryat, 2009) found that in many cases young people felt this had helped them have their views taken into account. Some young people, however, felt that legal representation had not been helpful, particularly where there had been little or no contact prior to the Hearing. This suggests that advocacy and legal representation may be most effective in the context of suitably trusting and respectful relationships.

At an organisational level, Wright and others (2006) suggest that identifying participation champions can increase children's participation. This might involve, for example, employing a participation worker whose sole remit is to improve children and young people’s involvement in decision making.

Other factors that facilitate children’s participation

Sinclair (1998) suggests that attendance at meetings is one of the most important ways in which children can be involved in social work decision making. Similarly, Campbell (1997) stresses the importance of creating opportunities for children to speak directly, or to have their views represented by a legitimate advocate. Both Sinclair (1998) and Thomas and O’Kane (1999) note that increasing numbers of children are attending meetings and reviews, but emphasise that they often experience these meetings negatively. Reinforcing the findings about the importance of relationships built over time (see above), Thomas and O’Kane suggest that reviews might facilitate more participation if they took place through a series of meetings rather than single events. Vis and Thomas (2009) underline the importance of children’s attendance at meetings. They found that those who had attended a meeting were three times more likely to have participated in decision making than those who had not; and this factor was multiplied for those who had attended two or three meetings. This suggests that enabling children to attend more meetings should be a priority for those who wish to increase children’s participation. Schofield and Thoburn’s (1996) review of research emphasises that children can be enabled to participate in the case conference process where this is seen as a priority. They argue that it requires: preparation before meetings by social workers or advocates who are positive about the contribution that children can make; support during the conference; skilful chairing; a respectful attitude amongst conference members and an opportunity immediately afterwards for children to discuss their feelings and the decisions made. Vis and Thomas (2009) suggest that increased attendance at meetings could be achieved by developing some kind of structural system to ensure this, such as a mandatory review meeting. They emphasise that this would need to be designed around children’s needs and involve active support and encouragement for children to express their views in person. Creegan and others (2006) suggest that the large numbers of adults at some meetings is a significant barrier to young people’s participation. Making meetings more ‘child-friendly’ may require reducing the number of professionals present.

In Thoburn and others (1995) study, giving a young person a choice in the type of help received increased the likelihood of their participation. In Thomas’s (2002) research, children
also said that it was important to have a choice about the means and extent of their participation. Many expressed a preference for one-to-one communication rather than talking to a group of adults, a finding supported by Cashmore (2002). Bell (2002) also found that children expressed a desire for greater choice within social work services. It is worth bearing in mind that choice is always contextual and can only be understood in relation to constraint. With involuntary social work clients, choice may be very limited. Nevertheless, it may be possible to offer children choice over certain elements of the social work process, and thereby promote their empowerment (Shemmings, 2000).

Several studies emphasise the importance of providing realistic access to a complaints procedure for children with social work involvement (e.g. Munro, 2001; Cashmore, 2002). Buckley and others (2011), however, found in their study of child protection services in Ireland that service users were often pessimistic about the potential outcomes of making a complaint.

Engaging with parents and families

Effective working with families depends upon the provision of support to parents as well as children. In child protection cases, for example, social work interventions commonly involve working with parents as well as children. In some cases, parents are the main involuntary client(s). Indeed, it is often argued that initiatives focusing solely on children can be unhelpful in the long term. For example, Brandon and others (1999) argue that ‘[p]ractice which focuses so single-mindedly on the child, at the very least, does not store up goodwill or engender trust with young parents, a large proportion of whom are likely to need social work and other services in the future, when other children are born’ (p. 106). However, reporting on research carried out in the UK in the 1990s, Freeman and Hunt (1998) noted that the majority of parents did not feel they had been meaningfully involved in decision making. Even for the majority of parents in their study who could be regarded as having positive outcomes, ‘partnership in decision-making was still a sham’ (p. 74).

Campbell (1997) presents findings about family involvement in case conferences in the Australian child protection system. She neglects to report on methods and her findings should therefore be treated with some caution. They do, however, echo many of the themes discussed above in relation to children. She suggests that parental participation requires:

- full and frank information to be given to families;
- professionals to demonstrate respect for families, and a willingness to listen to their understanding of the problem;
- preparation and support, including independent advocacy and mediation.

She also makes some useful practical suggestions:

- using a neutral venue with refreshments and a ‘time out’ space;
- avoiding having too many professionals at a meeting;
- using simple verbal presentations rather than written reports;
- avoiding jargon;
- having breaks in meetings, in which both family members and professionals can speak privately with their supporters.
A report by the Demos ‘think-tank’ (Cooper and others, 2003) reviews the English and Welsh child protection system, but its arguments have broader relevance. It mentions engagement with children, but the substantive discussion focuses primarily on engagement with parents. They argue that the child protection system in England and Wales should be reformed at the level of organisational culture (rather than merely organisational structure) by shifting away from its current focus on risk. As an alternative basis for child protection, they suggest three core principles: trust, authority and negotiation.

The authors suggest that trust cannot be based on a generalised belief in the decency of professionals, since this belief has been eroded. Instead trust between professionals and service users needs to be built through relationships, which takes time. They argue that ‘[t]he professional role needs to be supplemented by a range of structures that move beyond quality control mechanisms, and create spaces or forums where families and professionals can engage in real dialogue’. (Cooper and others, 2003, p. 36). They suggest this might include consultation with service users and others about definitions of abuse and the appropriate responses which should be taken in different sorts of scenarios.

The Demos report is helpful in placing child protection reform in the wider context of social work as a profession, and the trends of increasing managerialism, surveillance and demoralisation of the workforce. Its authors recognise that:

All professionals and working groups of staff are liable to become blinkered, defensive, inward-looking and internally conflicted. They need help to manoeuvre themselves out of such states, and understand the forces operating on them that encourage such retreat from the main task. (Cooper and others, pp. 33–34)

The report also suggests that work with involuntary clients could be improved by making voluntary provision more available and more attractive. This kind of proactive, preventative approach, which is common elsewhere in Europe, has the potential to establish trust with clients and to build a platform from which engagement might be more effective. In the UK child protection system, social work intervention usually only takes place when things have reached a crisis, at which point intervention will be involuntary, therefore offering less scope for negotiation and dialogue with clients. The report offers little direct evidence that preventative approaches are more effective at engaging users, but the possibility that it might warrants further exploration. In particular, the report discusses negotiation and mediation between families and social workers as a way of avoiding involuntary proceedings.

It may be that the involuntary nature of statutory child protection encourages particular ways of communication between social workers and families. Forrester and others (2008) present research using simulated clients to look in detail at the communication styles of social workers dealing with parents in child protection cases. They found that social workers who demonstrated more empathic communication encountered less resistance and facilitated greater disclosure from parents. This is supported by the findings of Tregeagle and Mason (2008), although it should be noted that Trotter (1999) suggests that wider evidence for the effectiveness of empathy is ambivalent. In the study of Forrester and others, most social workers were able to raise concerns with parents, but a focus on these concerns without empathy led to resistance and confrontation. The authors emphasise the role of empathy in
sustaining relationships with parents despite difficult issues being raised. They argue that with skilful social workers.

Parents can feel confident that the worker will be open about any concerns they have, but strengths and positives are also recognised and highlighted. Workers at this level are often able to build positive working relationships with parents despite the difficulty involved in working with concerns around child welfare. (p. 49)

They conclude that training in counselling skills, focussing on supporting social workers to respond empathically to clients, might help to promote better relations between workers and clients. Maiter and others (2006) make similar points, arguing the need to increase client power in their relationships with social workers. They suggest that power differentials can be reduced by maintaining respect for a client’s dignity and autonomy, acknowledging strengths, articulating the limits to the professional role and appropriate self-disclosure. De Boer and Coady’s study of successful child welfare relationships identify the importance of workers’ ‘soft, mindful and judicious use of power; and humanistic attitude and style that stretches traditional professional ways-of-being’ (2007 p. 35). One forum that perhaps allows for a realignment of traditional professional roles and hierarchies is the family group conference (FGC), which seeks to emphasise a value base in empowerment. Holland and Rivett (2008) note the capacity of FGCs to facilitate the productive expression and processing of the heightened emotions that can be central to work with families.

Buckley and others (2011) found that parents involved in the child protection system experienced social work involvement as intimidating and stressful but that good relationships with social workers could compensate for this. A trusting relationship was most likely to develop through the demonstration of warmth, friendliness and good humour. In particular service users valued courtesy, respect, accountability, transparency, experience and expertise in social work professionals. Healy and Darlington (2009), reporting on practitioners’ views about parental engagement, highlight the importance of recognising and respecting parental expertise: ‘Practitioners demonstrated respect by acknowledging parents’ understanding of their family and by seeking some degree of input from the parent about the nature of the situation and the solutions to it’ (p. 425). Drawing a similar conclusion from a different perspective, Tregeagle and Mason (2008) report on a case in which a mother avoided all engagement with social workers. Her hostility arose from a perception that ‘the workers gave their attention solely to the children and did not adequately support her’ (p. 397). Again, the conclusion is that effective working with families requires engagement with all parties. A narrow focus on children’s needs and wishes alone might be counter-productive in the long term.

Parents may also benefit from advocacy. Fraser and Featherstone (2011) draw on an evaluation of a project undertaken by the Family Rights Group in England and Wales providing direct advocacy to parents where there were concerns about their ability to care for their children. The majority of parents in the evaluation stated they found their advocates helpful in explaining processes to them, putting them at ease and giving them a voice. All the parents felt they could trust their advocate. This resulted in them feeling more confident and knowledgeable and therefore more empowered to participate.

A further issue for some parents involved in the children’s hearings system is the in-depth information about their personal histories that was given to their children in Children’s
Hearings papers. Research by Whitehead and others (2009) identified that some parents felt strongly that this violated their right to privacy and in some cases had been destructive of family relationships. In such cases, respect and trust were eroded. Parents and foster carers also reported that information in the papers could be inappropriate; for example, in one case copies were repeatedly sent to children who were of pre-school age and unable to read.

Conclusion

A number of themes emerge from this review. The first is that effective participation in the social work process is more nuanced than policy directions encouraging service-user involvement might allow for. Three discernible strands of effective participation are identified: the importance of good relationships, the provision of information and in some cases ensuring support to enable participation. These themes are apparent across direct work with children and with their families. Indeed, it may be unhelpful to consider the needs and rights of children apart from in their family context. Effective participation is implicated in improved outcomes for clients. It can be impeded, however, by overly bureaucratic and managerial practice cultures and by a lack of time available to build relationships.

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References


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