

The Voice of the Child in Social Work Assessments: Age-Appropriate Communication with Children

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Abstract

This article describes a child-centred method for engaging with children involved in the child protection and welfare system. One of the primary arguments underpinning this research is that social workers need to be skilled communicators to engage with children about deeply personal and painful issues. There is a wide range of research that maintains play is the language of children and the most effective way to learn about children is through their play. Considering this, the overarching aim of this study was to *investigate the role of play skills in supporting communication between children and social workers during child protection and welfare assessments*. The data collection was designed to establish the thoughts and/or experiences of participants in relation to a Play Skills Training (PST) programme designed by the authors. The key findings of the study reveal that the majority of social work participants rate the use of play skills in social work assessments as a key factor to effective engagement with children. Of particular importance, these messages address how social work services can ensure in a child-centred manner that the voice of children is heard and represented in all assessments of their well-being and future care options.

Keywords: Child protection and welfare assessments, voice of the child, play skills, child-centred, communication, abuse and/or neglect

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Introduction

The child protection and welfare system in Ireland resembles the systems elsewhere in Western Europe, but in particular the English system (Garrett, 2009). Paralleling the UK, Ireland's child abuse inquiries have been the catalyst that led to the incremental restructuring of what was and what some say still is (Burns and Lynch, 2008; Garrett, 2009) an underdeveloped child protection and welfare system (Burns, 2011). The child protection and welfare service is required by law to investigate concerns of child abuse and/or neglect made by professionals or members of the public. Child protection and welfare social work practice is faced with many challenges in its statutory duty to protect children at risk of abuse and/or neglect. The statutory services have become overwhelmed by child protection referrals and the current economic climate forces them to manage inadequate resources, prioritising children who are viewed to be at the greatest risk of significant harm (O'Reilly, 2013). Numerous child-care tragedies such as the Kilkenny Incest Case (McGuinness, 1993), Victoria Climbié (Laming, 2003), Baby Peter Connolly (Laming, 2009) and Roscommon Inquiry (2010) have highlighted the importance of social workers engaging with children in relation to their experiences.

In recent times, policy makers in Ireland and beyond have been heard to advocate for the voice of the child in all assessments concerning their well-being and future. Embedded in policy, legislation and contemporary regard for children is the child's right to participate in the assessment process. Every child has the right to express their views and opinions and to have these taken seriously by their social worker. Children must be active participants in the assessment process and be kept up to date, in an age-appropriate manner, of the status of their case.

This paper discusses evidence-based research demonstrating how an approach ascertaining the voice of the child can be applied in front line practice and the benefits of using age-appropriate communication with children during child protection and welfare assessments. The term 'play skills' is used to describe a variety of techniques that are used during assessments of child abuse and/or neglect to support children to communicate their thoughts, feelings and experiences. A Play Skills Training (PST) programme was designed and delivered to a team of social workers, who assessed the relevance of these skills in front line practice.

Play has long been recognised as the primary medium to learn about children and play is described as their preferred method of communication (Landreth, 2002; Schaefer, 1993). Landreth (2002, p. 529) states that play therapy is a 'developmentally based and research supported approach to helping children cope with and overcome the problems they experience in the process of living their lives'. Play therapy for children is an age-appropriate intervention, which parallels the counselling experience for adults. In Ireland, social work training equips students with counselling

skills to communicate with adult service users, but there is little to no focus on preparing students to engage with children (O'Reilly, 2013) despite the fact that child and family social work agencies are the largest employers of social workers (Burns, 2011). Research conducted on training social workers to communicate with children indicates a deficit in experiential learning in this area of social work education (O'Reilly, 2013).

This study highlights the importance of social workers using play skills as an age-appropriate medium to communicate with children during home visits, direct work sessions and investigative interviews. Basic play skills involve using creative age-appropriate means to communicate with children, in a manner and at a pace that is comfortable for them.

In the first section of this paper, the rationale for designing the PST programme is outlined. The second section describes the core elements of the training programme. In the third section, the method for collecting and analysing the research data is discussed. Following this, the fourth section presents the results of the study accompanied by a discussion of their relevance to current practice and research. The fifth section provides an insight into the challenges participants faced during the study as well as the limitations of the study. Section six concludes this paper.

Reason for the study

The UK *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health, 2000) was launched in 2000 and was commonly used by Irish social workers conducting child protection and welfare assessments. One of the key goals of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was to enable practitioners to stay child-centred when carrying out assessments. In terms of remaining child-centred, the framework recommends that the person carrying out the assessment must know the child and have a good insight into them as a person beyond their basic needs. Similar to the CAF developed in the UK, the *Framework for the Assessment of Vulnerable Children and Their Families: Assessment Tool and Practice Guidance* was published in Ireland in 2006 (Buckley *et al.*, 2006). In this assessment framework, Buckley *et al.* (2006) argue that children are not always put at the centre of assessments and social workers do not always engage with them in a meaningful way. They assert that direct work with children is a crucial component within assessments and involves seeing, observing, talking, doing and engaging with the child. Furthermore, they stress that social workers must be familiar with the child's preferred method of communication and the process must be child-centred. They encourage practitioners to be creative while engaging with children and to use play, drawing and painting to facilitate the process.

The 2012 *National Standards for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2012) recommends that child-centred services communicate with children and families in a manner

appropriate to their age, stage of development and communicative needs when ensuring the best interests of children. The following quotation by Bannister and Huntington to describe child-centred engagement with children fits best with ethos of this study:

Following, rather than always thinking we can or should lead; actively listening rather than always talking; engaging with children on their terms not just ours; being respectful of what they can do rather than largely focusing on what they cannot do (applying the deficit model of child development); or bringing our creativity and knowledge to the interactions we have with them, are all examples of routes to child-centred interactions (Bannister and Huntington, 2002, p. 12).

Koprowska (2010) outlines the importance of social workers being highly skilled communicators, but she believes that communicative incompetence is a widespread issue, with the risk of considerable implications. She asserts that the principal reason for working with children is their right to have their voices heard and, if social workers overlook or misinterpret communication from children, erroneous decisions may be made (Jones, 2003, cited in Koprowska, 2010). Koprowska (2010) maintains that children do not like sitting down and talking face to face with adults for too long and recommends that social workers get comfortable using age-appropriate toys and creative activities, which is more likely to result in successful engagement with a child.

Landreth (2005) draws attention to the emotional undercurrents resulting from abuse and states that they must be matched by some form of therapeutic process, highlighting the attributes that can be found in a play therapy relationship. He maintains that children who have experienced abuse should not be requested to describe this experience or their reaction in words, since they do not have the 'cognitive–verbal' ability to do so. Landreth (2002) maintains that children are more comfortable with play and claims that initiating verbal contact with a child creates an automatic barrier, which sends them the message that they must meet the adult's level of communication. Play is the primary way children learn about the world and start to organise and understand their experiences.

Holland (2004) acknowledges that representing the voice of the child can be difficult in child protection assessments and her research in the UK discovered that the child's narrative was a minor component in most of the assessment reports. The parent's narrative was quite in-depth, providing the reader with a vivid image of them and their lives. In general, children were discussed in the context of their parents and there was no description of them in the context of their own personalities, schools, play and interests. Only one report (which was in complete contrast to all the others in the study) mentioned that a child had been consulted about his situation through play sessions: three and a half pages were dedicated to a comprehensive account of the child's thoughts and experiences, only slightly shorter than the account given of his parents. Ferguson (2014) found that a large proportion of children

were not seen alone in everyday child protection practice and some initial meetings were so rushed that the social workers did not introduce themselves and explain their role. He believed one factor contributing to this shortfall in practice was that social workers had varied levels of communication skills, play skills and confidence in getting close to children. Ferguson (2014) highlights that, when these skills were present, practitioners were observed to have built meaningful relationships with children and their families. In addition, Ferguson (2014) states that there is a need for research that examines communication with children within the dynamics of child protection interventions.

Play is a valuable tool for engaging with children in many child welfare disciplines (counselling, psychology, and speech and language therapy) and there is a strong emphasis on engaging children in a child-centred manner in all matters affecting them in social work policy and literature. In light of this, the authors believed it was necessary to explore whether the skills used in play therapy sessions to engage with children could enhance communication between children and social workers during child protection and welfare assessments.

Programme elements

The PST programme was designed based on techniques used in play therapy to support children to express their world in developmentally appropriate manner. Table 1 outlines the main approaches shared, their purpose and the learning method applied during the training.

Method

Social workers have an ethical responsibility to practise in a competent manner, which is to be accountable for their professional requirements and the ways in which these requirements are met. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained through the Research Ethical Committee (REC) at the National University of Ireland, Galway. The REC aims to safeguard the health, welfare and rights of research participants. The REC granted full ethical approval for the research. The study was designed to comply with the code of ethics of the National Social Work Qualifications Board, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the National University of Ireland, Galway. The authors consulted the relevant persons and committees in advance of commencing the fieldwork. The current study was primarily conducted at a HSE Child Protection and Welfare Social Work Department in Ireland. Throughout the research process, the researcher met with the designated Academic Research Committee to discuss all issues with regard to the study.

Table 1 Approaches to which participants were introduced during the twenty-hour training

Approach	Purpose	Learning method/application
Introduction to play media	To engage and become familiar with the materials recommended for age-appropriate communication	Puppets; people; animals; figurines; dolls house and furniture; toy food and cooking implements; vehicles; play-dough; clay; paints, crayons and art materials
Connecting with inner child	Oaklander (2006, p. 165) asserts 'the best teacher is yourself as a child and it is vital to be able to remember what it is like to be a child'	Participants reflected on positive play experiences in their own childhood and used the art materials to represent those thoughts and memories on paper
Non-directive play (Axline, 1969)	To allow children to communicate their thoughts, needs and feelings through the medium of play To help children develop a positive self-concept, self-acceptance and self-respect	Children take the lead in all play activity Pace and direction of child is respected Opportunity to play out feelings and experiences Skills were discussed and shown using video demonstration. Participants practised the skills in groups of three
Therapeutic stories (Davis, 1990)	Stories are read or co-created with children to help reduce fear and to highlight the importance of making disclosures	Participants read a selection of stories Participants wrote a therapeutic story for a child they were working with
Six-piece story (Lahad, 1992)	To assess a child's coping skills. This method gives insight into the child's attitudes, beliefs, emotions and expression Participants created their six-piece story	Child creates six pictures: (1) Hero/ heroine and where they live; (2) What is their task or mission; (3) Who or what could help them (if at all); (4) Who or what obstacles prevent them from completing their task; (5) How will the main character cope with obstacle; and (6) Then what happens
Sand play (McNally, 2001)	Child creates a story/picture in sand and worker asks about the story/picture Worker may choose items if there is something specific they would like to focus on	Participants created pictures and stories in sand and were given a dictionary of symbols for materials chosen
Drawing techniques (Oaklander, 1978)	To explore certain issues or perceptions children have of their own experiences	Child creates their world on paper using lines, shapes, colours, but nothing real. Child gives a general description: makes a statement about each person/object: or says something they like and do not like to each
Worksheets (Jennings, 2005)	Assesses children's feelings; where they feel safe/unsafe: who they would telephone for help, etc.	Child is presented with worksheet relevant to their situation and asked to fill it out Participants discussed the numerous worksheets and then filled them out and discussed how the process felt
Birds nest drawing (Kaiser and Deaver, 2009)	Content of picture examined, e.g. Does nest include baby and parents? Is nest supported or secure?	Participants created their own nest picture and exercise was discussed in wider group

Table 2 Social workers' experience

Respondents	1–3 years	4–6 years	7–9 years	10+ years	Total
PST participants	1	4	3	1	8

The main participants in this research were the team of eight child protection and welfare social workers working with the main researcher. The data were collected during 2009 and 2010. There was a mixed range of experience among the participants and this is outlined in Table 2.

The following set of conditions applied in relation to the social work participants. Each respondent had to (i) hold the National Qualification in Social Work (NQSW), (ii) be conducting child protection and welfare assessments on a regular basis and (iii) give formal consent to participate in the study on the basis of informed consent rather than passive participation. There were no monetary resources allocated to this study. The use of social workers' time to participate in the study was negotiated with the principal social worker and the team leaders.

The main *qualitative study* provides testimonial evidence of the views of the team of social work practitioners ($n = 8$) regarding the material delivered on the training course and its applicability to assessment procedures. The interviews were carried out over three stages but this paper focuses on the third stage of interviews which occurred six months post training to examine social workers' experience of using play skills to communicate with children during child protection welfare assessments. These interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes each. The team was interviewed using the Biographic Narrative Interview Method (BNIM) which was identified as the most appropriate method to explore social workers' real stories of carrying out child protection and welfare social work assessments. The BNIM interview uses a non-directive approach to illicit the interviewee's story (Wengraf, 2008). This parallels the non-directive approach taught on the PST programme, with the aim of facilitating children to generate their story during child protection and welfare assessments. BNIM employs an open-narrative structure (as opposed to semi-structured highly guiding methods), which allows the interviewee to create their own form and sequence on what they choose to tell the interviewer. The method aims to elicit Particular Incident Narratives (PINs), which involves the interviewee focusing on a particular incident in a manner where they almost relive the moment through the narrative they are generating (Wengraf, 2008). This element of the approach was considered particularly appropriate to support the social work team in discussing the particular moments when they used play skills with a child as part of their assessment work.

The BNIM method of data analysis was used to analyse the data from the interviews. This involves the inclusion of three participants to identify the main themes and patterns consistent in the data. This process serves as a means of triangulating the data from the main qualitative study. The

process is very time-consuming and Wengraf (2008) recommends that three interviews are analysed in this manner. For this research, it was considered necessary to capture each social worker's experience of engaging in the PST programme and using the skills to communicate with children during the assessment process. All of the eight interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed with a panel to identify the main themes and patterns in the data.

Results

Six months after the PST programme, the team of social workers were interviewed and asked to give their story of applying the play skills in their child protection and welfare assessments. A large body of data was provided by the participants; however, five overarching findings were highlighted repeatedly as positive developments in their assessment work. To provide the reader with an insight into how communication was enhanced between children and social workers during assessments, some case vignettes will be presented first. Following this, the five key findings of the study will be outlined and discussed.

Case vignettes: play skills used during interviews and direct work sessions

The majority of social workers reported that communication was enhanced during their sessions with children. One participant described her experience of using sand play to engage with a twelve-year-old child:

She created a scene silently in the sand and said she did not know what her story was, but then stated that it was a girl sitting on a rock because she doesn't want to be with the other people. I then asked her what might make her want to be with the other people and she said if they were kind to her. I mean, I'm not trained to interpret play or sand play, so I asked her if she ever felt like that girl. She said sometimes and said she has to do so much work at home with the younger children that she never gets her homework done and then she gets into trouble in school.

Another participant described a direct work session with a teenaged girl and recalled:

She was able to write the little things that were going well in school with friends, at home and then we did the little signposts of where she was in her past, what things were like at home, in her life in general and then we looked at the future and at some point she said 'I can't'. She could see no future because something was blocking her. So we used the signposts and in the box she was able to write and I think she felt very free at that stage then, so I just said 'Do you want to write it while I'm sitting here or do you want to just go away to another part of the room?', which she did and she

wrote down—I can always, I can see her just in the box—‘My brother abused me. My brother abused me’. I think that very big piece of paper helped, you know. The big flip-chart page was able to help her map out and really see where her life was going and what the obstacles were.

One participant discussed an investigative interview where she explored a domestic violence incident and used the worksheet labelled ‘The Toys and Dolls Know’:

She was only 6, I think, and she said the girl tells her toys why she is crying and sad. She said they can all hear the fighting downstairs. I mean, we were investigating domestic violence and I felt that was really poignant that that was the first thing that came to her mind.

One participant recounted using *timelines* with a child during an investigative interview and the parents had previously claimed to have had no history of social work involvement:

We used the timeline to look at memorable times in her life. She was only eight and had been to four different schools and she named different friends in each school. She drew a few houses and I asked her about them. It transpired she had been in relative care for a period of time.

This participant said they were astounded with this information, since they would never have thought to ask the child a question in relation to a previous placement.

Another participant met with a six-year-old girl who was referred in relation to domestic violence concerns. They allowed the child some non-directive play time at the start of the session and explained their role as a social worker to protect children. The child was asked to draw a time when she felt frightened and the social worker recalled:

She drew a picture of a house with a little girl at her window, looking out. Downstairs were people in the garden and a car with a blue light. I asked her if she would like to tell me about her picture. She said ‘The mammy and daddy are fighting in the garden and their child is watching. The next-door-neighbour rings the Guards to stop the fighting and they come’. I really feel that giving the child a half an hour with me before we entered her personal world helped her to relax and disclose what she had seen. I was really amazed with this intervention. I met this particular child a few times before because of neglect concerns and the poor little thing had the same response her mother had when questioned about alcohol misuse and child-minders.

One participant used drawing techniques to engage with children during investigative interviews and recalled the following sessions:

I did the rosebush exercise recently with a 10-year old who had been exposed to domestic violence. When I asked her to tell me about her rosebush, she said ‘My rosebush lives in the middle of the garden and I look after the rosebush. The bush loves bright skies and some rain to get a drink. The rosebush gets really sad with dark skies and when the roses won’t stop fighting’. I asked

her if she ever felt like the rosebush and she said she did. She said daddy fights with everyone in her family except her and this makes her scared.

Five key findings of the study

This section outlines the five primary themes reported by the participants as the positive developments that took place in their practice after engaging in the twenty-hour PST programme.

Commitment to a child-friendly environment

Generally, participants reported having a greater awareness and commitment to providing a child-friendly environment when meeting with children. They reported that, prior to meeting children for investigative interviews or direct work, they now check the space to ensure they have materials available that will suit the child's age or interests. In relation to investigative interviews, one participant stated:

I'd make sure that we have a stock of stuff here, that we wouldn't run out . . . If you have a young child that likes blocks, you know to have something like that there that they can identify with and make them maybe more relaxed, so it can be easier for them coming into a session.

Koprowska (2010) draws attention to all the opportunities social workers have to meet with children and recommends that they have appropriate materials available to work with children when the opportunity arises. The PST participants described thinking about children and their interests more before meeting with them and they talked about ensuring that they had fresh art materials and appropriate toys to use when engaging with children during investigative interviews and direct work. Woodcock Ross (2011) concurs with this and advises social workers to prepare suitable materials, according to their knowledge of the child's age, interests, talents and cognitive ability to commence the communication process. It is crucial that services built up around protecting children show them at every point of contact that the buildings are a place for children and the workers are there to engage with them at their pace and in a manner that reduces stress for them.

Increased confidence while engaging with children

The majority of participants reported an increase in their confidence while engaging with children during assessments. They stated that they felt more confident communicating with children using play-based methods as opposed to asking the child questions about their life. Many participants felt more comfortable using this approach because they found children were more relaxed, engaging in this manner. All participants agreed that the play skills improved their communication skills with children and

recommended that social workers should be using these skills. One participant stated:

Now I feel a lot more confident and comfortable meeting children for investigative interviews than I used to. I now know that I have developed skills to engage with children at their level and even if they are afraid coming into the interview, they now usually leave with a smile on their face having enjoyed their experience in the social work department. I think it is very important that children can remember their meetings with us as a pleasant experience. I believe this will allow them to think of us as protective figures that are there to protect them.

[Regehr et al. \(2010\)](#) assert that a major factor in a worker's confidence while assessing child abuse is their perceived ability to engage with children and all family members. Given the need for a better image for social workers in light of child protection scandals, it is important that social workers feel confident carrying out this extremely important and complex work. [Winter \(2011\)](#) found that social workers experienced anxiety about causing children further harm and distress during their meetings and this was a major barrier in the formation of meaningful relationships with children. It is the responsibility of social work educators and employers to ensure that social workers are skilled communicators. Social workers need to feel confident around engaging with children who may be in urgent need of care and protection.

More child-centred experience

All participants conveyed that by using play skills, the assessment process resulted in a more child-centred experience. The participants found that by spending time with children and moving away from the formal questioning procedures, they gained a better insight into the children they were engaging with. One participant outlined:

I would have approached some of my work with children, for example, like doing investigative interviews, would have been done on a very formal basis, which really was asking questions and taking notes of the child's response. When I think back now, I probably found doing individual work or direct work with children quite difficult, you know, as I would have struggled with what to do with the child . . . So I feel a big change has taken place in how I meet with children. It feels more child-friendly.

Some participants recalled that they now find children open up to them more quickly when they use a play-based approach. They commented that children are happier entering the session with them when they have the toys and art materials available to them:

I find children open up to me far easier . . . I can see now when children come into a room, they almost forget themselves and they get involved with the toys in the room and you can just see them feeling at ease . . . it's really lovely to see they actually, after the first interview, want to come back again. Some

children will come into the room so easily and there's times they don't like finishing the play.

Lefevre (2010) recommends commencing the communicative process by using a free play approach to allow the child to build a relationship with the social worker at a pace that is comfortable to them. She believes this approach is more child-centred and provides the worker with an opportunity to make sense of the child's way of conveying, expressing and exploring their inner world. Engaging with children in a non-directive manner was a key focus of this study and participants found this to be the most challenging, as their usual interaction with children is quite directive.

The voice of the child

Generally, participants reported that, by using the play skills to engage with children, they developed a greater insight into the child's world, leading to the child's voice receiving greater representation in the assessment process. One participant recalled:

I have better relationships with the children now, as I always sit and draw or play with them in the health centre or on home visits. I learn so much about them and I think they are amazed that this person is actually sitting down with them and giving them all their attention... I'm also happier with my paperwork as a result because the child's voice is much more evident when we take the time to engage with them in this way.

Participants recalled that, before doing the training, they used the formal interview procedures to engage with children, but found this method to be ineffective most of the time. One participant outlined:

I would always chat with children, you know. This is what we're told to do and the thing is that this often resulted in having to re-interview them because they just aren't ready to chat away about life at home to people they have just met... even in the second interview often you just get your Yes and No answers, which realistically give little insight into the child's life.

Another participant stated their practice feels safer when they are sure the child has had the opportunity to contribute to the assessment:

The children I can dedicate time to, to get to know them in this way, are the ones I will feel confident have had their voice represented in the assessment and its unfortunate that I will have to pick and choose who gets this intervention.

Milner and O'Byrne (2009) assert that a core principle of social work practice is to work in a child-centred way by listening to and taking the child's voice into account as much as possible. Participants found the non-directive approach was very helpful in building an open, trusting relationship with the child before using the focused techniques to explore certain issues. The use of focused play techniques allowed for a greater expression of the child's world.

Koprowska (2005) believes that asking a child to draw their family can be very valuable during assessments, as it usually results in a richer discussion about family members and their likes and dislikes. If the voice of the child is truly to be captured and represented in child protection and welfare assessments, it is crucial that social workers facilitate this process using age-appropriate communication with children. Developing meaningful relationships with children is the only way to gain an understanding of their world and to know whether their attachment needs for safety and protection are being met.

More enthused about their work

Most participants described *feeling more enthused about their work*. They stated that they enjoy using the play skills to meet with children. Generally, participants stated that, when they discovered that the process was easier for children, this resulted in them feeling less stressed about exploring issues of a very personal nature with children they hardly knew. Some participants stated that working directly with children was the element of social work that had attracted them to the profession in the first place. One participant outlined:

I actually feel now that I'm enjoying the job more because the children seem to enjoy meeting with me. And that's just so so important, you know. That is the reason I wanted to do social work with children.

This point is reiterated by another participant, who added that they have discovered a whole new side to themselves:

Since I did the training on play skills, I've really opened up and found a new way of doing my assessments with the children. I find the new way of doing it makes me think about what I'm doing with the children far more and I'm actually enjoying it more It kind of brings out a whole new side in yourself. I'm far happier working with children this way.

This wish to engage in direct work is consistent with research carried out by Gupta and Blewett (2007), who found that social workers were more likely to stay in their post when they were in a position to provide preventative and protective services for children by engaging in relationship-based social work. Munro (2010) highlights the fact that recruiting and maintaining staff in child protection have become a major problem in many countries. This finding is significant in terms of job satisfaction within child protection and welfare practice. It is important that employers are mindful that practitioners enter the social work profession to engage in direct work with children and families.

Challenges and limitations

Generally, the social workers found it easy to incorporate the use of worksheets and drawing techniques into the investigative interview process. In

relation to carrying out direct work with children, three of the eight social workers did not have time to engage in direct work. One participant stated that they continue to refer all the direct work on to other professionals, yet feel this is not in the child's best interest:

I think it can be quite a shame at times because I think we've made the initial contact with the child in terms of carrying out an interview . . . I think it's probably quite difficult because they are expected to open up to so many different people along the way . . . you know, I think it can kind of have the opposite effect and lead them to a point where they don't really have anything to say about it anymore.

This participant provided a number of examples where they would have liked to carry out direct work with children on their caseload but, due to resource issues, they had to refer them to other professionals and outside agencies. Another participant provided a number of examples of her experiences of using play skills in her assessments. However, she reported ongoing difficulties in not being able to offer every child the same service:

Sometimes you have to pick among children who you're going to spend that time with and there's a clash there—between trying to balance caseloads and balance the service demands and the service's needs for outcomes and for initial assessments to be completed within 28 days.

Deficits in resources continued to be an issue during the past six months for the social work team. The issue of time was reverberated in every interview as the primary barrier to the lack of engagement in direct work with children. Although one participant reported that she could see how useful the PST programme was, she stated 'social workers unfortunately we don't get to do direct pieces of work on a weekly basis with the child. Our system doesn't lend itself to that and our caseloads don't lend themselves to that'.

As with all research, this study was limited by various methodological constraints. First, due to the main researcher's insider status on the social work team, the social workers may have used the play skills more in their assessment work to support their colleague. They may have also rated the intervention more positively because the main researcher was part of their team. The participants did however present as passionate about the approach and the results from the team were consistent with the results from a nationwide study that was carried out as part of the overall study (O'Reilly, 2013). Second, due to limited time available for social work training, only twenty hours in total were allotted to running the PST programme. The PST training programme provided social workers with a 'taste' and an insight into communicating with children through the medium of play. Having said this, the feedback on the usefulness of the model and training was very strong and it may be that an introduction can lead to growth, in this case for those participants who go on to use the method in the future and build on the training received.

Conclusion

This article examined the need for social workers, in the area of child protection and welfare, to be equipped with developmentally appropriate communication skills to engage with children about deeply painful and personal issues. The importance of adopting a child-centred approach when intervening in the lives of the children the service has been established to protect, has been highlighted. The article explains the importance of using playful and creative techniques to engage with children and to access their world in a manner that is comfortable and enjoyable to their stage of development. The child needs to be the primary focus of all child protection activity. This evidence-based study provides rich practice examples of how the use of play skills can enhance communication between children and social workers during the main points of engagement in child protection and welfare assessments: investigative interviews, direct work and home visits. Play is described as the language of children and it is an important element of social work practice in ensuring the child's voice is represented in all assessments of their well-being and future care decisions.

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