

## **Methods and tools that inform collaborative work with young children**

### **Brief for practitioners**



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## Introduction

The aim of the PANDA project is to promote the participation of young children (aged 12 years and under) in decision making in a transnational context through strengthening professionals' collaboration with young children known to social services, especially in child welfare and child protection.

Led by 8 partner organisations from four countries, Belgium, Spain, Norway, and Northern Ireland (social workers, managers, policy officers, academics, and trainers), the project has three objectives:

- to increase the skills and knowledge of professionals by creating a media library.
- to support organisations to create the conditions necessary for participatory social work with young children by providing a framework for policy officers and managers to support the implementation of a participatory approach.
- to provide trainers with new tools and methods in this area.

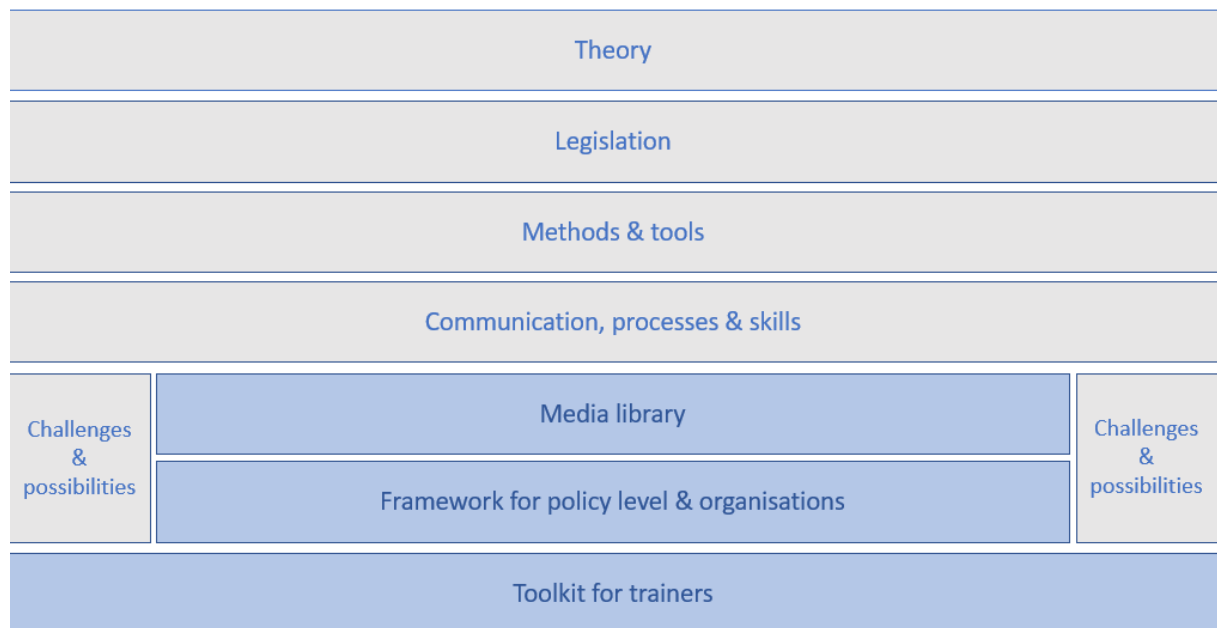


Figure 1 Panda concept (2022)

The purpose of this brief for practitioners is to focus on specific methods and tools to strengthen professionals' collaboration with young children and to draw attention to pedagogical tools that might be useful to facilitate children`s participation and communication.

## **1. Understanding the phrase “tools and methods”**

Social work practitioners make use of tools and methods in their everyday social work with children and families. The two words ‘tools and methods’ act as synonyms in everyday professional talk and are often used interchangeably.

According to social work literature the social work process involves referral/intake; information gathering; assessment; planning; intervention; evaluation and termination. For each of these phases in the process various tools and methods can be used.

Tools are defined and understood as a collective term for various materials, games, activities, play, artwork and interactive and electronic media that are utilized to promote children’s participation rights and build relationships and conversations with young children (Lefevre, 2018, pp. page 185-206).

Methods is a term referring to the ways in which tools are used, the processes, practices, and approaches. Hence, when applied to collaborative, communicative, conversational, and participatory practices with young children, the term ‘method’ refers to the approach being adopted and the processes being implemented in practice, that may use some of the types of ‘tools’ referred to above.

Research has identified a lack of the use of pedagogical tools and methods in social work with children and a lack of play skills (Ferguson, 2016; Husby, Slettebø, & Juul, 2018; Ruch et al., 2020). Research has also identified lack of communication skills (Ferguson, 2016; Ruch et al., 2020; Toros, DiNitto, & Tiko, 2018) and the fact that training in this area needs to be improved so that professionals have the skills to communicate effectively with children (Lefevre, 2017).

A participatory conversation/communication method focuses on how a professional invites and engages a child in a conversation. Various methodological approaches are described in the literature. When choosing a method, professionals should take account of the child’s choices and preferences, their development, their competence and capacities, their age, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, language, culture and heritage and their context. They should also think through what the purpose of the meeting is (for example, to give the child information, investigate the child's experiences and understanding, or to support the child to better understand her/his experiences, feelings, and the situation).

## 2. Conversation methods

The dialogical conversation method (DCM) concerns the dialogic approach to talking together. The method builds on the theory of connection and communication (Bunkholdt & Kvaran, 2015, p. 147), in particular dialogical theory and children's cognitive development (Gamst, 2017). The method was originally developed by research to be used by police officers in child interrogations (Gamst, 2004) but subsequently has been tested and adapted for conversations with children in contact with the child welfare services (Langballe, Gamst, & Jacobsen, 2010).

A basic principle in this method is that the child is recognised as an important and competent informant, capable of informing adults about experiences in life. In the phase of free narration, the social worker must listen more than ask (Gamst, 2017).

The DCM comprises a phased and systematic approach i.e., prepare and make connections with child, engage in free storytelling, end the encounter, and conduct follow-up. The phases are similar to methodical social work in general, but the free narration phase is an important characteristic of this method.

Another method is the "Everyday life conversation"; a dialogical "interview" method used in child welfare and research. The method was originally developed for use in research by Hanne Haavind (1987), and later adapted research with younger children (the way-of-life interview with 4- and 5-year-old children) (Andenæs, 1991). The method is widely used in research with children (Clifford, Fauske, Lichtwark, & Marthinsen, 2015; Gulbrandsen, 2018; Ulvik, 2007) and in the education of social workers (Gulbrandsen, 2018). The aim of this method is to explore (get information about) the child's everyday life; their tasks, the structure of their day, who they relate to during the day, and how they interpret and experience what is happening during their day.

Applying the "Everyday life conversation" method, a professional is following the child through the day asking open questions related to events in their everyday life. The social worker might start by asking, 'What happened when you woke up this morning?' and then continue, with the response dependent on what the child's answer is. To be effective, the professional should adopt an open questioning style. Activities can support this approach, for example, the child being invited, with the support of the professional, to draw a timeline to visualise a day in the child's life.

Other methods used in conversations with children involve the professional: i) facilitating a conversation with words and nods to encourage the child's further narration; ii) paying attention to the child's imagination using magic questions; iii) paraphrasing by repeating the words from what the child has said to drive the child's story forward; and iv) using externalization techniques to tell the child that he or she is not the problem, but the problem is the problem (Kvello, 2021).

Conversation methods based on visualizing are also of great interest. The Duplo methodology is one of this kind. With the help of Duplo figures (Figure 2), children can act out, present and model relationships and events from everyday life and tell freely (Van Doornik, 2021). The Duplo figures have different characteristics, for example gender and ethnicity (Figure 3 and 4).

All methods need to be attuned to the child's choices and preferences, their development, their competence and capacities, their age, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, language, culture and heritage and their context.



Figure 2: W. Eerdeken, on the Duplo method, NTNU 2017. (Photo by I.S D. Husby)



Figure 3 and 4: Different gender and ethnicity (Photos by W. Eerdeken 2022)

### 3. Communicating with the 0-3 year old

The very youngest's children are also active participants in our encounters with them. Not merely objects of our interest. There is a need to highlight that the infants and the toddlers are relational and reciprocal. To engage these children in "conversations" the social worker must be flexible and prepared to do a mixture of observing and responding. The zero to three non-profit organisation have some informative learning and examples (Figure 6)



Figure 6: *The zero to three*, video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwQ0NA7GzEg>

To communicate with pre-verbal children, the infants (0-1) and the toddlers (1-3), the social workers need to a) have awareness of early childhood development b) awareness of how and in what ways young children reach out to communicate c) be prepared to put awkwardness to one side and respond on the level of the child by using touch, noises, facial expressions, gestures rather than just spoken word (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Video "**How your baby's sense of sight develops**" [https://www.babycenter.com/baby/baby-development/how-your-babys-sense-of-sight-develops\\_10400986](https://www.babycenter.com/baby/baby-development/how-your-babys-sense-of-sight-develops_10400986)

## 4. Connection and the use of pedagogical tools

Connecting with children is a prerequisite underpinning all collaboration with children. It is a good idea to use tools and activity for this purpose. Social pedagogy emphasizes the “the common third” when working with children. This means the professional uses objects and artefacts to which and through which both child and adult relate and connect with each other, such as activities and games. Engaging in activities with the child, such as play and games, which are accessible and meaningful to children, can be a way to establish a connection and start to build a relationship. Establishing a relationship of trust, allows the child to express experiences and feelings, or talk about their life.

A range of pedagogical tools might be used in direct communication and practice with children. All tools should be culturally and ethnically relevant to individual children and reflect their preferences, capacities, and competences. Some tools are suitable in mapping processes (investigation, reviews), others more suitable when the purpose is informing the child or supporting a child to understand their feelings and thoughts or to support their well-being. Some tools might be more suitable in one-to-one communication, others more suitable when working with groups. A pedagogical tool can help visualize issues, events, and relationships in a child’s life, including their situations, their history, their family’s history, their social networks, feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

Tools can help children feel more comfortable, self-confident, open, creative and spontaneous (Doucet, 2019). Tools and play are close related to the language of children and use of tools can make they feel more respected. Child friendly spaces also make it easier for children to share their experiences.

Examples of tools Include: crayons and paper for drawing; worksheets; conversation pictures or drawings describing different situations; puppets and figures; sand, plasticine, Playdoh, paint, clay, social network maps, games, tablets, smartphones, computers, apps, films, music (music therapy); and children’s books focusing specific topics (abuse, violence, drug misuse, mental difficulties, bullying, friendship, caring and so on).

More widely, activity-based communication and collaboration can make it easier for children to “talk” and to share their experiences and perspectives. This could include doing activities together such as gardening, walking, playing, eating, cooking, doing a car journey together. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that car journeys provide a safe space for children to talk where both adult and child are engaged in a journey together. The adult doing the driving can listen and the child can talk without having eye contact with the adult (which can feel intimidating to some children). Some social workers have a bag in their cars with a blanket, toys, books. The child can wrap the blanket around them to feel cozy and safe. Some social workers encourage children to choose their own music or audio book. All these things help develop connection with other and provide a safe space to talk.



## 5. Tools to support/facilitate children's narrations (storytelling)

As noted, to facilitate children to talk about their life experiences, relationships, feelings, and thoughts and wishes, professionals might communicate with children using drawings, pictures, worksheets, workbooks, dolls, Duplo figures. Some of these methods are described in further detail below.

**Drawings** Children often communicate through drawing, they can benefit from its use, and it can help professionals get to know the child better, because drawings assist the child in imparting information about their life situation, their feelings, and their experiences. Drawing while talking can make it easier for some children to remember things related to the experiences they have had. Drawing can reduce stress and speech pressure when children are going to talk about difficult topics.

Social workers should not interpret children's drawings themselves but should seek the meaning of the drawing from the child and keep a note of this alongside the drawing or write it on the back of the drawing. Children should also be encouraged to sign and date their drawing. This accords the child respect and shows that their contribution is being valued. Agreement with the child should be reached about who will look after any drawings or work made and where they will be looked after. If a child wishes to keep the things they make, the professional should seek the child's permission to take a photo of the work and notes about its meaning. The professional should seek to include, with children's permission, the relevant work in relevant meetings about the child.

**"My House"** -A house is drawn on a blank sheet. The child draws the family, and draws on faces (angry, unhappy, happy). The house can be a starting point for conversations about what is happening in different rooms, and in relationships between family members. It is often used in investigative conversations with children ages 4 year and older and working on child welfare measures, and out-of-homecare (Eide & Rohde, 2009).

**The House-Tree-Person (H-T-P)** This projective drawing technique is used to obtain information about how an individual experiences themselves in relation to others and their family environment. Like all techniques of its kind, the H-T-P facilitates the projection of personality elements and areas of conflict into the therapeutic environment, allowing them to be identified for assessment and shared for effective therapeutic communication.

**Conversation pictures** Conversations based on pictures might help the child to communicate in a nuanced way and provide the social worker with information. Pictures are suitable in conversations with small children. Holmsen (2011) describe this method in the book "Samtalebilder og tegninger"

– en vei til kommunikasjon med barn i vanskelige livssituasjoner (Conversation Pictures and Drawings. A Way to Communicate with Children in Difficult Life Situations).

The book consists of a set of drawings and pictures of a mouse in different situations. Different types of questions are designed for each picture. These can be used by professionals to start a conversation, where they ask the child what is happening in the drawing / picture followed by more open-ended and/or focused questions. For example, professionals might ask the child if they have experienced something similar, or how it is at their home (meals, routines around bedtime, when adults get angry, happy, and so on). Small children often speak from their own experiences when they give content and story to the pictures (Figure 8).



Figure 8 Copy of examples from Holmsen's book: "Samtalebilder og tegninger" – en vei til kommunikasjon med barn i vanskelige livssituasjoner; 2011. Illustrations by Kjell Midthun.

## Worksheets

There are several resources in this category, as listed in Figures 9, 10, 11 and 12 below

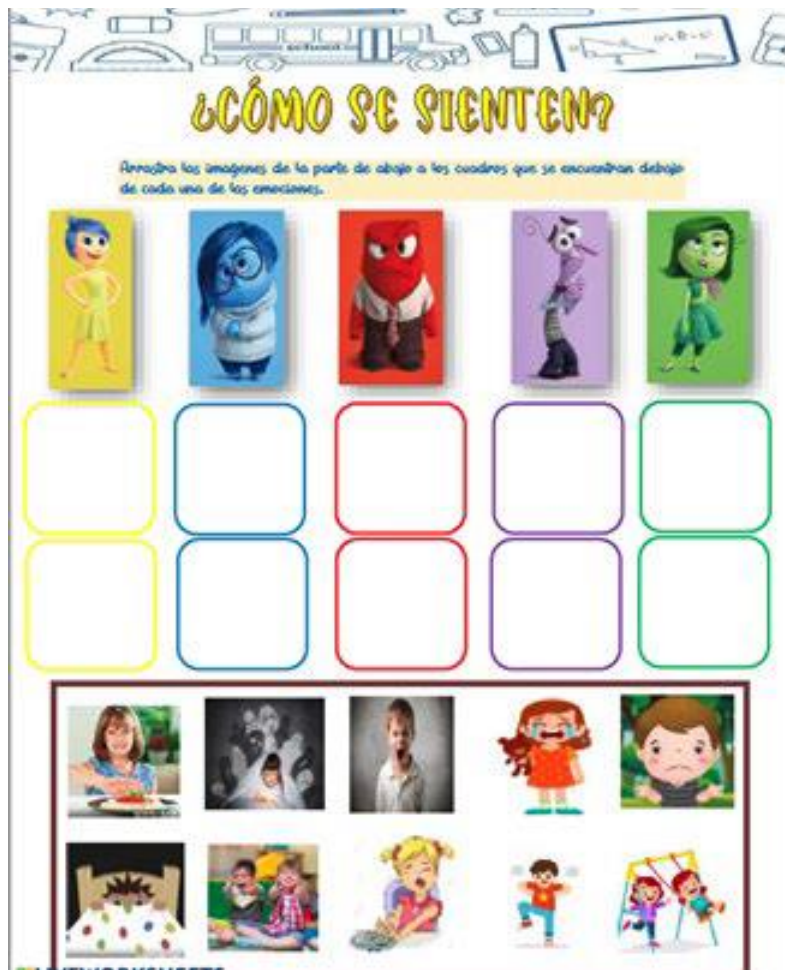


Figure 9 The Feelings List <https://www.liveworksheets.com/ij1923871xu>

### The Three Houses

The Three Houses method takes the three key assessment questions of Signs of Safety assessment and planning - what we are worried about; what's working well and what needs to happen - and locates them in three houses to make the issues more accessible for children.

House of Worries      House of Good Things      House of Dreams

Figure 10 "The Three Houses" (Leaflet for Professionals: Signs of Safety. HSCB, Northern Ireland, 2019)

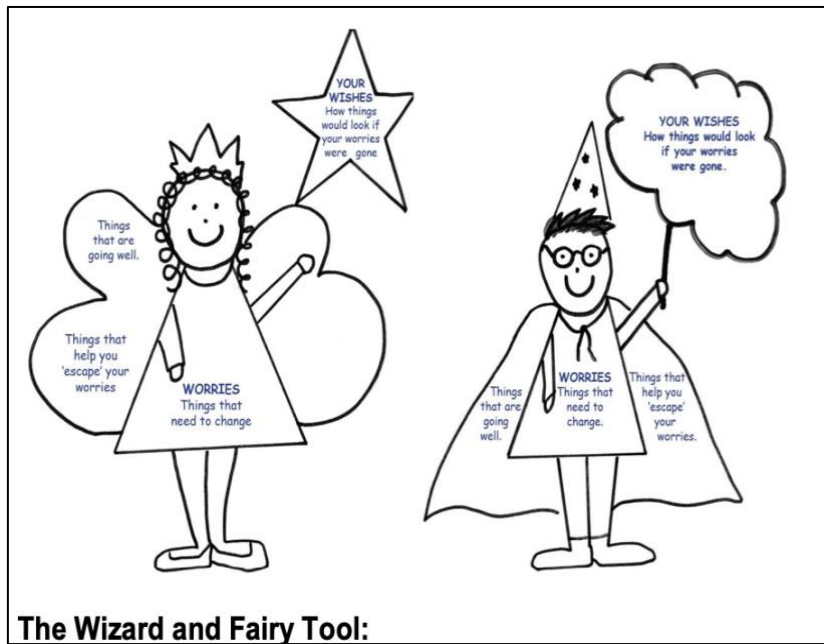


Figure 11 “The Wizard and Fairy” (Leaflet for Professionals: Signs of Safety. HSCB, Northern Ireland, 2019)

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age** \_\_\_\_\_

**How happy are you?**

friends home

hobbies school

about you family

Thinking about everything we've talked about, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 10 is being as happy as you could be... where are you now?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Figure 12 “How happy are you?” [https://nscp.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/media/3r2hxbxa/06d\\_my\\_feelings\\_-\\_children-1-003.pdf](https://nscp.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/media/3r2hxbxa/06d_my_feelings_-_children-1-003.pdf)

## Workbooks

There are also several resources in this category. **The Social Workers' Toolbox** is a great material. In the following we display some examples in this category of tools.

**“Vondt i magen” (Tummy hurts).** A tool for young pre-school children where there are concerns for their well-being. There is an ‘e-book’, a film, printable drawing pictures, all of which invite the child to talk about what’s on their mind (Figure 13).

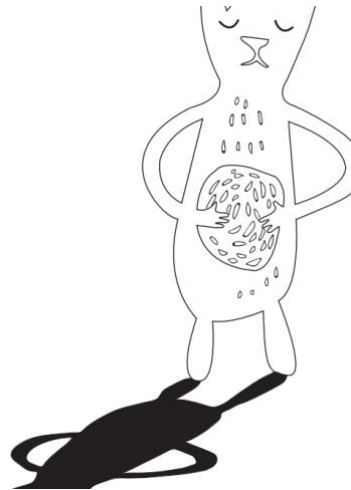


Figure 13 “Vondt i magen”. <https://www.blakors.no/ressursbank/vondt-i-magen/>



Figure 14 “All about me” <http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/all-about-me-direct-work-sheets-activities-booklet/>

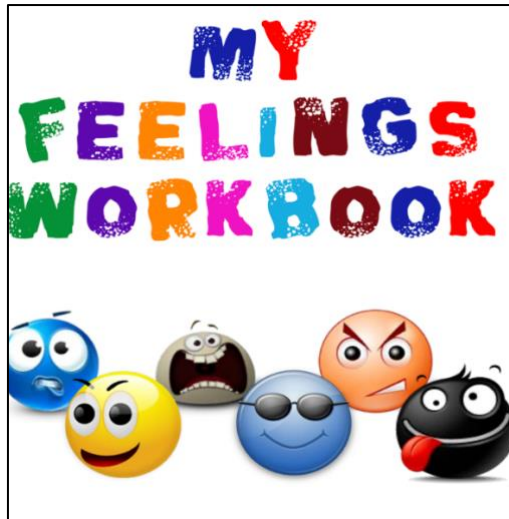


Figure 15 My feelings workbook (<https://hope4hurtingkids.com/resources/My-Feelings-Workbook.pdf>)

### **Dolls, puppets, and figures**

Dolls (Figure 16), figures (Figure 17) and puppets can also be used in conversations with children to facilitate children's narratives. From three years of age children can use three-dimensional objects, like dolls and figures to show and talk about events. Often children give more details when they talk and play through dolls, as indicated by the evidence supporting their use in play therapy in mental health care (Kvello, 2021).



Figure 16 R. Juul demonstrates use of paper-dolls from the book, Drugli, M. B., & Engen, M. (2004). *Spør barn få svar! Samtaler med barn om sosiale relasjoner*, on the PANDA international week, Gent, November 2022. (Photo by I. S D Husby).

African Family 8pc Wooden Block Play Set



Figure 17 African Family, wooden block play set. <https://coloursofus.com/270-multicultural-toys/multicultural-play-figures/>

### Social network maps

This is a tool for mapping a child's social network, and their experiences of (and perspectives about) their relationships with people in their social networks. The map can be shaped as a circle divided into different pieces (of cake) where family is represented by one segment, and relatives, friends, and school are represented by other segments. The child is placed in the middle of the circle.

In collaboration with the child, the child's relationships are drawn into the map. Close relationships are drawn close to the child and relationships that are experienced more distantly are drawn further out in the circle. The lines from the child to the other persons in the map, are marked as good relationships, possibly ambivalent, conflict-filled, or distant, depending on what the child feels. The map can be used to talk with the child about the relationships in his/her social network (Kvello, 2021).

### Games

In this category the "**Hello game**" (see Figure 18) developed by K. Sommerseth and G. Winsnes (child psychologist), might be helpful. This is a board game for children in a difficult life situation, which provides an opportunity to talk about emotions. The game consists of dice, personal figures, and cards with questions about what people like, do not like, what they have experienced, and their degree of well-being.

The questions focus on relationships, fantasies, self-image and what they think others think. Both the child and the professional answer the questions. The game can be used to establish a rapport and connect with a child and can also provide information about the child. The game is suitable for children from kindergarten age and up to teenagers.



Figure 18 Hei spillet (the Hello Game) (K. Sommerseth and G. Winsnes) <https://www.heispillet.com/>

To find games, books and toys that reflect children’s diversity and ethnicity we recommend the website [Coloursofus](#) (Figure 19)



Figure 19 Picture from the intro of the website [Colours of Us](#)

Some games have been **developed for therapeutic** purposes. These capture children's experiences in relation to their families. They allow for the exploration of feelings and emotions in a playful way and enable children to express their emotions, experiences and difficulties that they have encountered. Some noted weaknesses are the potential difficulties in objectively interpreting a child’s symbolic world. Learning to distinguish between what is experienced and children's imaginations is important.

One example in this category is a game called “Psykologisk førstehjelp” (“**Psychological First Aid**”) (Figure 20). This is a game developed by S. Raknes (psychologist) (2017). This toolkit can help children cope with difficult thoughts and situations. In the first aid kit, tools can be found to use when thoughts are difficult, and emotions are challenging. An illustrated book with texts aimed at children, it has simple tasks and worksheets that can be downloaded from the internet, as well as two figures that help inspire play and creativity and talk about feelings, thoughts, as well as identify helpful and unhelpful thoughts.

The tool can help to strengthen children's emotional regulation and support them to acquire regulation skills. The conversations are related to six topics: 1) a description of the incident, 2) the child's feelings related to the incident, 3 and 4) identifying red and green thoughts that arose, 5)



reflections on what the child can do to solve the problem and 6) with whom the child can seek help. The game is designed to be used with children from 8-12 years of age.

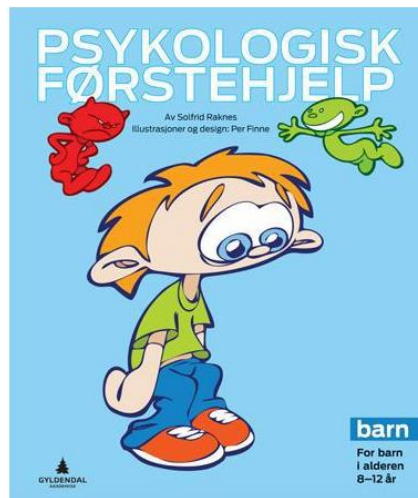


Figure 20 The game “*Psykologisk førstehjelp*” (*Psychological First Aid*”, S. Raknes).  
[https://www.ark.no/boker/Solfrid-Raknes-Barn-9788205400023?gclid=CjwKCAiAleOeBhBdEiwAfgmXf8lx1DFfIN07kgiMQv3zQrE\\_hiDXQhDMwbh-jncVFdnvLc0m9V67LBoC11cQAvD\\_BwE&qclsrc=aw.ds](https://www.ark.no/boker/Solfrid-Raknes-Barn-9788205400023?gclid=CjwKCAiAleOeBhBdEiwAfgmXf8lx1DFfIN07kgiMQv3zQrE_hiDXQhDMwbh-jncVFdnvLc0m9V67LBoC11cQAvD_BwE&qclsrc=aw.ds)

### Art workshops

These enable emotional expression, emotional management, increased self-esteem, reduced anxiety, increased concentration, and fosters creativity and group reinforcement.

### The Life Book

This is used to help a child in foster care (Figure 21) or adoptive placement to develop a sense of identity and understand his or her experiences with separation and placement.



Figure 21 Picture from a presentation about these category of books.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjzDpLU5a0o> (retrieved 04.05.2022).

## 6. Tools to strengthen children’s participation in the community

Children’s right to participate includes the right to participate at the level of community as a collective and as part of local and/or community initiatives. The use of digital technology has facilitated and enabled children and young people to participate at a community level. For example, cyber correspondents are network of blogs and comprises a social network of young people under the age of 18 years who engage in online discussions regarding areas/issues where they wish to see change.

## 7. Digital resources to support communication with children

**The LifeCity app** (Figure 22) and **the Mind of My Own App** (Figure 23) are two examples of child-centred resources on tablet computers or other devices to support communication between professionals and children and that enable children to access their participation rights. Digital resources of this kind are both a method and a tool. The tablet itself is the tool and the elements or the question and the digital tasks motivate and guide children to express themselves.

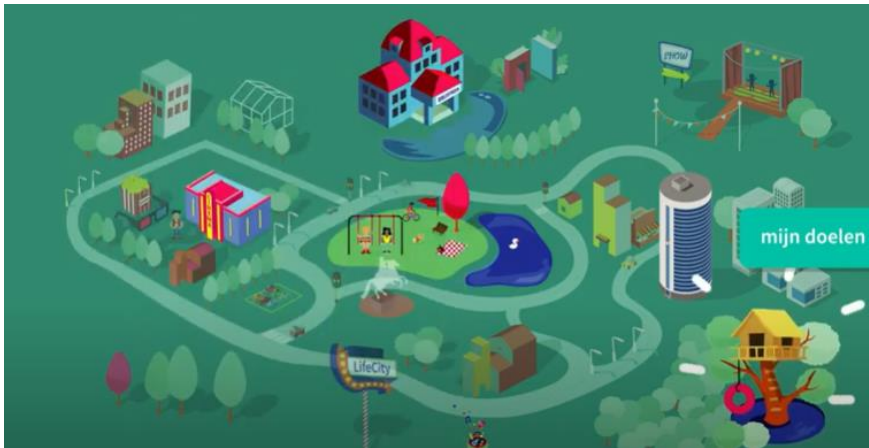


Figure 22 The LifeCity App. <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=be.hogent.lifecity&hl=en&gl=US>

**The LifeCity app**, depicts a city in which the child can move through with a self-chosen avatar. In this way the child has control of the content in their conversation. It is designed together and for children aged 6 to 12 years to help them express their concerns and their feelings. The method is developed by researchers from HOGENT in Belgium

**The Mind of My Own** app, (Figure 23), is also designed to give voice to children’s lived experiences and to be heard by their professionals. The children create their own account, and they say how they feel and what support they need from their workers.



Figure 23 Illustration of The Mind of My Own App. <https://mindofmyown.org.uk/>

Other web-based programmes exist to help adults inform children about supports available to deal with violence, abuse and bullying which can be challenging and emotional topics to talk about with children. Examples include:

“**Jeg vet**” (“**I know**”) – this is designed to help prevent violence, abuse and bullying by giving children in kindergartens and schools more knowledge about these topics.

“**Kroppen min eier jeg**” (“**I own my body**”) – these films are designed for children in kindergartens and are to be watched by children and adults. The films focus on difficult issues such as sexual and physical abuse.

“**Hjelp! Pappa slår!**” (“**Help! Dad Beats Me!**”) (Figure 24)– These are films to be watched with primary aged school children and come with supporting resources on how to talk and reflect with children over the films content. They are designed as an educational tool in primary schools.



Figure 24 “Hjelp! Pappa slår” (“Help! Dad Beats Me”). <https://vfb.no/artikler/hjelp-pappa-slar/>

In addition, there are further web-based communication tools that are designed for children to give support, guidance, and advice when the children are at risk and when they may find it difficult to tell parents or other adults about the abuse and violence being experienced through fear. These include resources from an EU project, Participation for Protection.

Other web-based communication tools are designed to be used by children who are lonely and lack access to someone who they can talk to about worries. Digital technology enables these children to communicate directly with others about their fears and worries directly and by themselves.

The webpage [The emergency telephone for children and young people](#) –is an example of a self-tuition tools where any child (aged 7-12 years) can learn how to talk with an adult if there are problems at home. A child may also chat anonymously with an adult. In a small video clip, the child is greeted by another child of same age who gives advice to the child caller who is having difficulties.

Another example is the website “[Jeg vil vite](#)” (“ I want to know”). On this webpage both children and adults learn about violence and abuse. This web-based resource is designed to be used by children interactively.

To assist in communication and play skills with children, there are web-based programmes. The website [Snakkemedbarn.no](#) tutorial educates professionals to talk with children who might have experiences of violence and abuse. The program provides training in conversations with children (avatars) of different ages who are struggling at home, at school or in kindergarten (Figure 25).



Ole 6 år

Ole trekker seg bort fra de andre barna i barnehagen. Han har sagt noe som gjør deg bekymret.

Figure 25 Example of an avatar, [snakkemedbarn.no](#)

In addition, the website offers training videos to reflect upon and learn together with colleagues.

The use of web-based communication skills development compliments other ‘hands on’ programmes designed to enhance communication and play skills, including the programme developed by O'Reilly and Dolan (2016) which trains social workers to become more confident in using play therapy approaches, such as sand play, worksheets and drawings in their communication with children. Known as “The play skills training (PST) programme”, this is delivered in face-to-face settings.

## **8. Pay attention to the quick fix trap**

The use of tools and methods can be very useful to structure our actions and thoughts, but one should be careful not to use methods or tools as a mere instrument to get quick results. Fully involving families in child welfare and child protection requires more than just adopting a (participatory) practice model and use certain tools and methods.

To realise the benefits of a child centred approach requires a whole-system commitment to aligning the organisation to the participatory practice. Placing parents, children and everyone naturally connected to the child at the centre of what we want to achieve in child welfare and child protection services, is a very significant paradigm shift, where the dominant culture was for professionals to define the problems and decide what is required to solve them.

Therefore, the use of tools and methods should always be part of an organisational culture and vision. WHY do we want young children (and their families) to participate? What is our basic attitude towards the children and the families in child welfare and child protection services?

If we are convinced about the surplus value of participation of families and (young) children, we will spontaneously search for ways and manners to achieve the children's voice in the best possible way. In that case the motivation to use certain tools/methods comes from within.

On the other hand, if we are not fully convinced or maybe unaware of the importance of involving the child's perspective, we will probably experience the use of tools/methods as a burden.

## **9. Conclusion**

The purpose of this briefing has been to explore methods and tools which promote professional communication and collaboration with younger children. From the outset of any communicative encounter with children, professionals need to be aware of children's communication style, choices and preferences, competence, characteristics (gender, age, disability, culture, religion, ethnicity, language), relationships, and context.

From this perspective they should agree with the child a plan for communication selecting from available tools and methods of relevance to the child and the issue being explored. The tools and methods should be based on consideration of the child's choices and preferences, their development, their competence and capacities, their age, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, language, culture and heritage and their context. The tools used should be culturally, ethnically relevant using figures, people, scenes familiar to a child's own context. The tools should be attuned to a child's disability.

There is a wide range of tools and methods, and this research brief is by no means an exhaustive list. Rather, it has been written to inspire professionals and to encourage their curiosity to explore further by accessing literature, searching on the internet, and trying out approaches in practice.

A sensitive approach is required to using tools and methods that takes account of the power imbalance in the child/professional relationship and that takes account of the child (their age,

gender, ethnicity, experience), the issues being discussed, the choices, preferences, and competencies of the child (and the adult), and the wider contextual issues.

The dialogical approaches and participatory tools that have been highlighted, can lead to greater recognition and respect. Digital technology has opened new possibilities for professionals and children, and these means of communication and collaboration require further exploration.

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