

COMMUNICATION PROCESSES & SKILLS

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 processes in a transnational context, through strengthening professionals’ collaboration with young children known to social services, due to child welfare and child protection concerns.

Led by 8 partner organisations comprising social workers, managers, policy officers, academics and trainers from four countries - Belgium, Spain, Norway and Northern Ireland - 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 draw attention to the concept of collaboration and communication with children and outline the definitions and processes involved.

1. Collaboration and communication with children: definitions

Communication and collaboration with children are key aspects to strengthening children's participation and provide the context within which tools and methods are used. Communication (both verbal and non-verbal) is the basis for collaboration.

Collaboration can be understood as a process of co-creation, generating new answers and conclusions about topics and issues. Neither the issues nor their solutions are determined in advance; the parties must work through the issues together through dialogue, which is based on a subject-subject relationship (Juul & Husby, 2020).

Understanding the process of dialogical communication is also helpful. Dialogic conversation is face-to-face communication where the participants relate to what the other is saying and alternate between speaking and listening. A dialogical approach is more conducive to fully recognizing children, as they are invited to participate, and the communicative encounter is reciprocal. Research reveals that more children are asking for more dialogical communication and "chats" with social workers (Inger Sofie Dahlø Husby, Kiik, & Juul, 2019; I. S. D. Husby, Slettebø, & Juul, 2018).

2. Factors that impact on communication and collaboration

Children's participation is influenced by factors such as the child's choices and preferences, their development, their competence and capacities, their age, gender, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, language, culture, and heritage, as well as their past and present experiences, their level of trust, the nature of their relationship with the professional and the issues being discussed, as well as their family and social context and living conditions.

Children's participation is embedded within complex power relations that must be taken account of as issues of power are at the heart of all communicative encounters between children and adults (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010). Children hold an asymmetric power relation in relation to adults and parents due to their relative dependency needs. Power issues need to be acknowledged and addressed as far as possible given that children's participation is an activity which is carried out in constant interaction with adults, i.e. as a process of mutual learning and reciprocal socialization (Casas et al., 2008).

3. Communication skills

Professionals require broad and wide-ranging communication skills which include the ability to: a) establish rapport; b) convey and tune into verbal and non-verbal messages including nods, noises, gestures, body language, eye contact; c) use appropriate questioning skills including the use of open and closed questions; d) use accurate listening skills including summarizing, paraphrasing,

reflecting back; and e) respond to challenging and difficult emotions, issues and feelings including sadness, distress, anger, hostility, resistance; f) manage endings effectively. It is not necessarily only children who may have challenges with these different skills in different situations, but professionals too (Gjems, 2009).

When thinking about communication skills in practice, children start to communicate as soon as they are born (body language, gestures, noises, and verbal language), however their skills depend on what experiences they have, including practicing vocabulary and gaining conversational experience. Linguistic competence is only one form of communication. A child's development of linguistic competence relates to their knowledge of words and concepts and their skills in being able to express themselves so that others understand what they want to convey (the message and the intentions).

Gjems (2009) points out that when children begin to acquire language and conversational knowledge, they may be preoccupied with finding words and formulating sentences to the extent that they do not listen to what the other person is saying, or they may forget to take turns. They may also have difficulty taking the other person's perspective. Given communication skills involve attracting attention from other participants in the conversation, understanding when and how to take turns in conversations and being able to share experiences and thoughts with others, professionals need to be aware of each child's level of development and competence and have a broad understanding of communication beyond linguistic competence. This is especially the case for children whose first language is not the language of the country they are living in, where children have a disability or where the familial or cultural expectations may not encourage children to communicate in conversations with adults.

4. Contexts in which communication takes place

Communication with children to seek their views is a widespread, required, and routine part of social work practice and can be broadly grouped into three categories: a) consultative processes - a process through which information is obtained to improve legislation, policies and/or services; b) participative initiatives - often government or organizationally-led for the purpose of strengthening processes of democracy, the creation of opportunities for children to understand and apply democratic principles or the involvement of children in the development of services that impact on them; and c) promotion of self-advocacy (Lansdown, 2001).

Professionals come into contact with young children in various social organizations, authorities, and services such as the public child welfare and protection services, kindergarten and schools, residential and therapeutic units, the voluntary sector, and other non-governmental organizations (NGO's).

Importantly, children are communicated with to seek their participation either individually or collectively. Individual participation is defined as the child's legal right to become involved and gain

influence throughout the entire professional delivery process (Seim, Slettebø, & Koht, 2007). The goal is to improve the service delivery and support measures provided by individual practitioners and entire professional organisations.

Collective participation takes place at the meso-level i.e. interventions projects or programmes intended for the entire population of a local community and often relates to the improvement of service practices and policies for everyone in the same situations (Seim & Slettebø, 2011). For example, the work done by the non-profit organization Change Factory in Norway or VOYPIC in Northern Ireland, may be understood as a form of collective participation in the way that young people with social service experiences work together with the professionals to influence the policies, the child welfare legislation, and improve the social service practices for every child in the community.

When seeking children's views for the purpose of any of the above listed activities (and in relation to other activities), professionals need to consider what they understand by the term 'to seek a child's view'. Importantly, children's views are not formed or expressed in isolation from their wider context. The context (family, community, society) influences what their views are, whether they chose to express them or not, and also how and when and through what medium they chose to do so. The context also influences professionals in terms of which views they seek from children and how, why, when, and where.

A sociocultural approach provides a helpful framework for professionals seeking children's views and 'making meaning', because it acknowledges the influence of both the contexts/structures within which professionals and children operate and live and also the agency of children and professionals, that is the exercise of their choices, preferences, free will (Ulvik, 2009). The premise of the sociocultural approach is that children (and adults) shape their opinions and views through interaction with other people. Subjective opinions and views are formed and negotiated through a process of 'joint-opinion-creation' between children and their relationship partners (Ulvik, 2009). Professionals need to be aware that the question is not only about whether the children are given the opportunity to participate, but also how the specific child participates, what opportunities for participation exist, and how the opportunities for participation can be strengthened (Ulvik, 2009).

5. Conclusion

Communication and collaboration between professionals and children involves complex social, relational and contextual processes. When engaging in communicative encounters, professionals need to be aware of the child and the particular issues they are facing, their family and community context and wider social structural considerations. They also need to have a highly developed understanding of communication skills and processes and an awareness of methods and tools (see related brief for practitioners on tools and meth

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