

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES INFORMING UNDERSTANDINGS OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

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 comprised of 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.

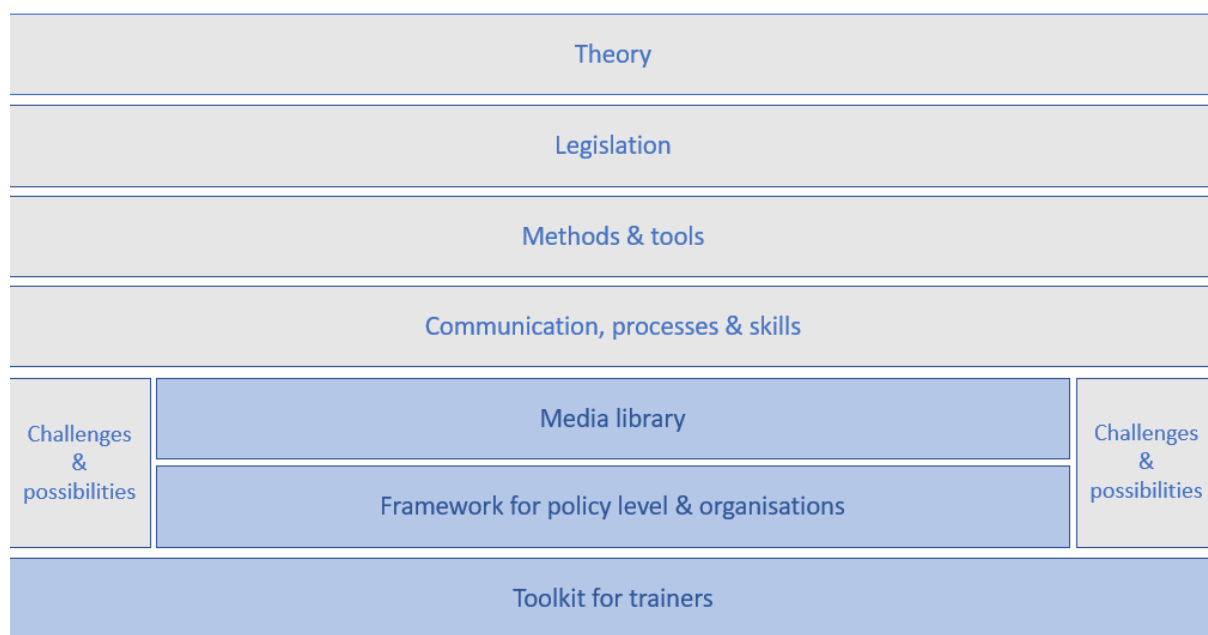


Figure 1 Panda concept (2022)

Underpinning children's participation are shared theoretical and conceptual frameworks which professionals are often unaware of. This brief for practitioners focuses on theoretical and conceptual frameworks that often underpin work in this area. The included list is not exhaustive; the most common are included. The aims are to: draw attention to theoretical and conceptual frameworks; focus specifically on key concepts associated with sociological frameworks; and increase awareness of completed research that applies various theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

1. Theoretical and conceptual approaches: an overview

There are several theories/frameworks that are useful when thinking critically about participation with young children. They are:

- Geography (mobilities), digital anthropology;
- Social pedagogical approaches;
- Sociological approaches - Prout and James (sociology of childhood); Goffman (theory of social interaction), Honneth (recognition and (mis)recognition); Sennett (the rituals and politics of cooperation); Bourdieu (capital, field, and habitus);
- Philosophical approaches;
- Bronfenbrenner (social ecological approach);
- Psychosocial approaches;
- Rights based approaches;
- Relational and relationship-based approaches;
- Participation models; and
- Art, drama.

In this research briefing, we focus on sociological, social pedagogical, relationship based and philosophical approaches as these underpin recent research and help inform practice.

2. Sociological approaches

2.1 Sociology of childhood

Historically, the perception of what constitutes a child, and what childhood is, has been overshadowed by a narrow view of developmental psychology where the emphasis is on naturalness includes and the process of maturation (ages and stages). From this perspective, children can be seen not as human beings, but as human *becomings*; as ‘adults in the making’; in essence, children are ‘incomplete’ waiting to become ‘complete’ adults, social and adult-like. This type of view can permeate professionals’ interactions with children and can legitimize the exertion of adult power over children. The result can be that children tend to be excluded from decisions and be deprived of their autonomy because of their assumed incompetence and an over-emphasis on their dependence on adults.

There are, of course, developmental psychological approaches that have emphasized the social and cultural aspects of children’s development. The sociology of childhood emphasizes that childhood is not biologically defined but is to be understood, defined, and experienced, by social factors such as context, culture, and time. The sociology of childhood defines children as individual human beings (not human *becomings*), contributing, shaping, and being shaped by their context (Figure 1). This approach emphasizes that children:

- participate in social relations

- have knowledge and views that are derived from experiences of relationships, milieus, and events
- interact with the world, and that their interactions affect both children’s and adults’ everyday worlds
- have social, moral, and political competence and should be regarded as participants and contributors to society
- should be recognized as people who are active subjects. essentially indistinguishable from other people
- are active agents in creating their childhood and are not just ‘socialization projects’ for adults.

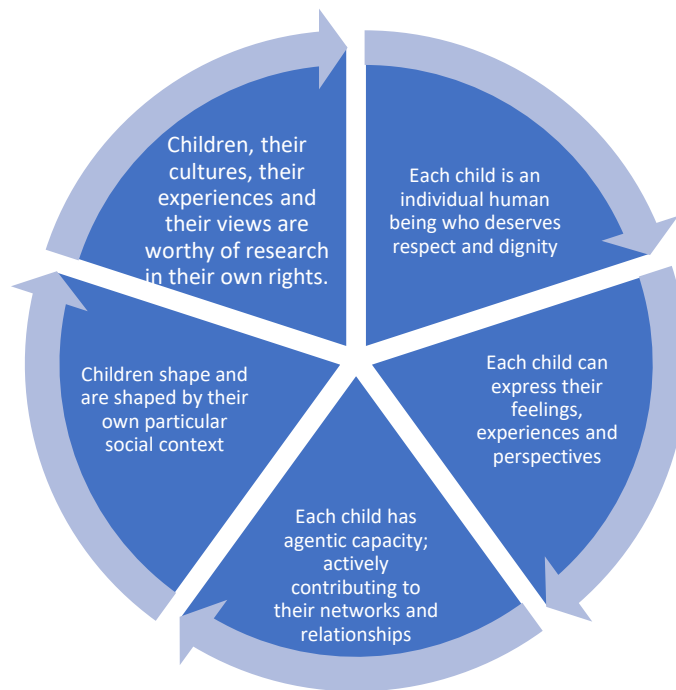


Figure 1: Sociology of childhood: views on each child and relevance for social workers

2.2 Social pedagogical concepts

Derived from the work of Natorp (1899) and Pestalozzi (1907) and comprising several core tenets, social pedagogy is concerned with the theory and practice of creating a *thriving garden for children* and indeed for all human beings: a fertile environment conducive to their well-being and learning, developing their inherent resources, connecting them to their surroundings. It aims to address social inequality and facilitate social change by nurturing learning, well-being, connection - both at an individual and community level - and empowerment. This is achieved through a holistic and relationship-centered way of working with people across the course of their lives. The principles are illustrated in the ‘Diamond Model’ so called because all human beings are precious, have a variety of knowledge, skills and abilities and everyone has the potential to shine out (Figure 2).

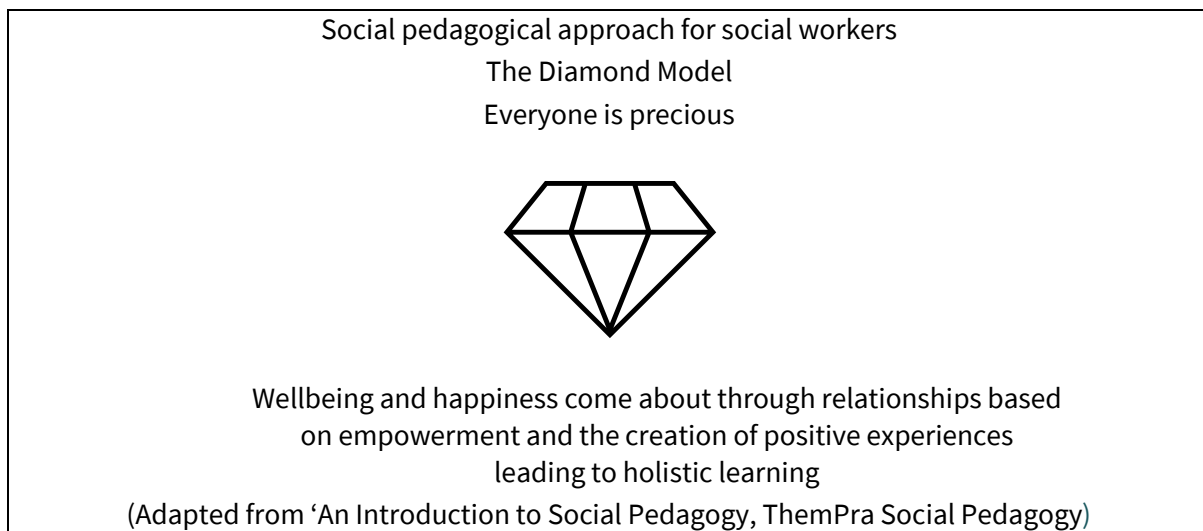


Figure 2: The Diamond Model

Characteristics of the approach include: a respect for children's inherent worth; a belief in children's potential; interconnectivity of thought, feelings, and actions; the fundamental importance of trusting relationships; and in conducting relationships the importance of the separation of the professional, personal, and private selves. The social pedagogical framework offers a way of exploring and engaging with the often-neglected emotional dimensions of relational and communicative encounters between social workers and children. Key concepts include 'haltung', 'head-heart-hands', the 'professional, personal and private self', 'the common third' and *mutual* respect, trust (Figure 3).

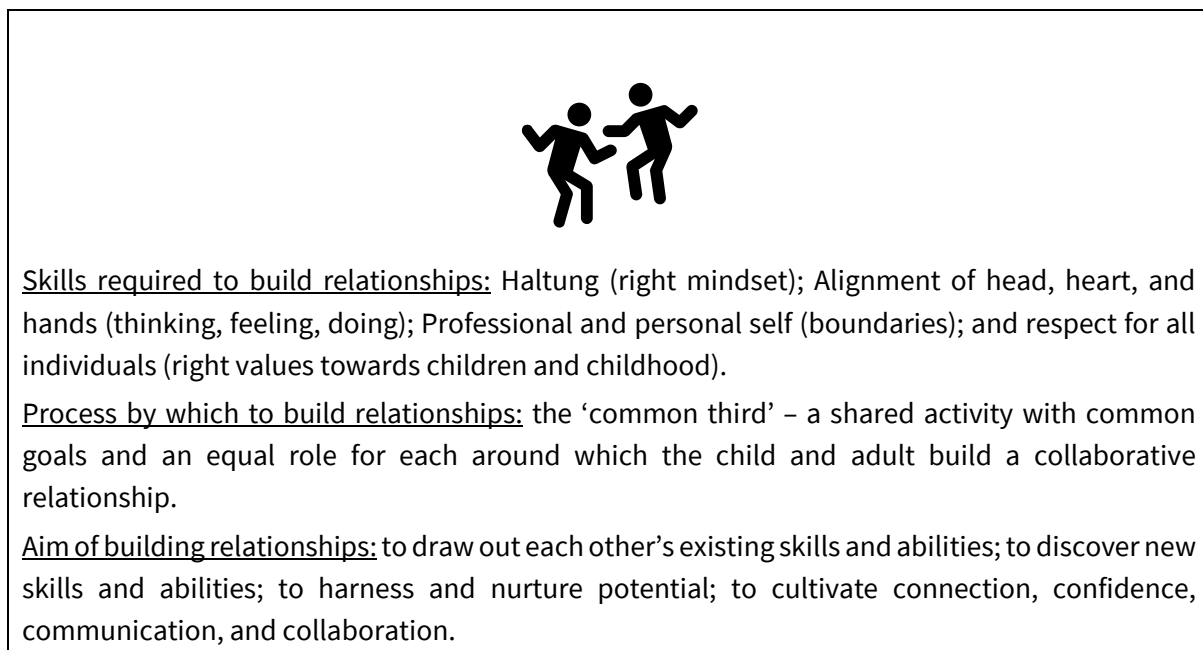


Figure 3: Social pedagogical concepts applied to social work practice

2.3 Relationship based approaches

Relationship-based practice has been part of social work practice for several decades but has adapted and responded to new features of the context in which it is taking place. Core features of relationship-based practice include:

- Human behaviours and the professional relationship are an integral component of any professional intervention.
- Human behaviour is complex and multifaceted. People are not simply rational beings but have affective (both conscious and unconscious) dimensions that enrich but simultaneously complicate human relationships.
- The internal and external worlds of individuals are inseparable, so integrated (psychosocial), as opposed to one-dimensional, responses to social problems are crucial for social work practice.
- Each social work encounter is unique, and attention must be paid to the specific circumstances of each individual.
- A collaborative relationship is the means through which interventions are channelled, and this requires a particular emphasis to be placed on the 'use of self'.
- The respect for individuals embedded in relationship-based practice involves practising in inclusive and empowering ways. (Ruch, 2018).

Importantly relationship-based practice recognises that both practitioner and service user bring a range of experiences and emotional responses into the encounter and that each participant's understanding of themselves *and* the 'other' will have a bearing on the relationship and its meaning (Turney 2012). This allows practitioners to keep in touch with both their thoughts and feelings about the relationship and to be alert to not only their cognitive, but also their affective, responses which inform how the uniqueness, risk and uncertainty that characterise all social work relationships are addressed. These particular features of relationship-based practice are relevant to practice that seeks to promote participation in decision-making processes of young children as they help practitioners to develop attuned and empathic interventions.

2.3 Philosophical approaches - Honneth

In order to develop a 'sense of self', individuals rely on the feedback of others and of society as a whole. This feedback can be defined as forms of recognition. Honneth identifies three forms of recognition:

- (i) love, or the emotional recognition of the needs for love and care;
- (ii) the legal recognition of rights as a human being; and
- (iii) solidarity or social esteem, as part of one's contribution to a community.

For each form of recognition, Honneth identifies the context that best provides this and the impact on self. A further column denoting the relevance to social work practice with children has been added as noted in Figure 4.

Forms of recognition	Context	Impact on relation to self	Relevance to social work practice
Love	Key child/adult relationships	Self-confidence	Importance of SW relationship with every child
Legally enshrined rights	Civil society	Self-respect	Importance of SW promoting and protecting the legally enshrined rights of each child
Esteem	Broader society	Self-esteem	Importance of SW providing social, employment and other community opportunities for each child's talents to be acknowledged and respected.

Figure 4: Honneth, recognition, impact on relation to self and relevance to social work

Love – occurs within the context of a positive, meaningful, and intimate relationship with others. Self-confidence is acquired, is nurtured, and grows.

Rights – occurs within civil society; the home; the school; the relationship with the social worker; the community. If rights are respected, promoted, and protected self-respect acquired, is nurtured, and grows.

Esteem (solidarity, social esteem) – occurs within work and broader society. If an individual's accomplishments and achievements are recognized by broader society, self-esteem is acquired, is nurtured, and grows.

Applied to social work practice with children, the spheres of recognition are inextricably linked to one another at individual, state, and societal level and are highly relevant to practice as explained further below.

At the individual level - Having an emotional bond is an important source of comfort and warmth for children in the child protection system. Social workers are ideally situated at the individual level to provide a close emotional connection with a child. Such relationships have elements of mutuality; each can learn from the other by listening to what the other has to say as equals. There is an emphasis on setting and on creating spaces to reflect, do things together and this can extend to making decisions in a participatory way.

At the state level - the UNCRC provides a legally binding framework that recognizes the individual rights of children. Legal frameworks help create a culture that understands participation as a *visible and unconditional right* with a legal obligation on social workers to involve all children and young people in decision making.

At the society level - Honneth's model safeguards the democratization of processes and decisions, where all actors' voices are heard, aligning directly with article 12, UNCRC. Social change needs to happen more rapidly and with less resistance so that children and young people are seen as equally able to contribute fully to the social order.

2.4 Bourdieu (sociology)

To understand the micro dynamics of power in enabling children to access their participation rights, where it lies, how it is exercised, and how power relations become entrenched and internalized, Bourdieu's three concepts (field, capital, and habitus) as outlined in Figure 5, are helpful.

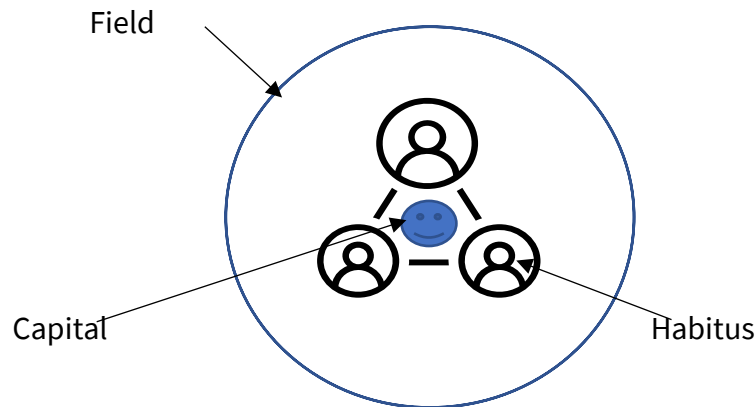


Figure 5: Bourdieu: field, capital, and habitus

A field - represents a 'structured spaces of positions' where 'all the [people] that are involved in a field share a certain number of fundamental interests, namely everything that is linked to the very existence of the field' and [where] they are 'engaged in [a] struggle' to accrue, acquire or keep a certain form of capital' (Bourdieu 1993, p. 72-73).

Social work decision making fora (case conferences, looked after child meetings), can be defined as 'the field', in which various professionals come together because they share a common interest namely the child at the center of the decision-making forum.

Capital - The relationships between professionals in the field (or here, the decision-making forum) are not equal, but are characterized by subordination and domination with different professionals engaged in a (usually unconscious) struggle with each other which is determined by the type and amount of capital possessed.

Bourdieu identifies various type of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic). Symbolic capital can include various elements. In the context of decision-making fora, the capital around which professionals are meeting and in which they 'compete' to exert control over the final decisions about what is in the best interests of the child is a capital called 'knowledge of the child'.

Habitus - Each professional may have different knowledge as to what is best for a particular child. In the meeting they trade their knowledge and can use this as an attempt to exert control over the decision making for the child based on the status of the knowledge claims they make about the child. These processes are further assisted by 'habitus'; which is crucial to the processes of obtaining, and accruing 'capital' in this case 'knowing the child' capital.

Bourdieu notes that some people are able to dominate the field (in this case decision making fora) and make them function to their advantage because they have a habitus (words, ways of speaking, thinking, and acting; also known as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions) that they have acquired through their social status and that imply knowledge and recognition.

There are various examples of habitus: class habitus; status group habitus; gender habitus and more specialised types of professional habitus, including a social worker professional habitus. It is possible to identify the practices, methods, attitudes that social workers come to adopt, largely unconsciously, through their daily work experience and position as qualified social workers. In meetings, this does not mean that social workers (and other professionals) consciously set out with an array of techniques to 'gain the upper hand' in the decision-making processes but rather, that these operate 'at a practical, informal, and tacit level'.

Parents, by comparison, occupy a subordinate subject positioning within the field of decision-making fora which meet to discuss their child. The concept of the parental habitus includes those behaviours, attitudes, dispositions that reinforce their subordinate position within review meetings.

Application to the micro processes of power in decision-making fora - In decision making fora where there are contested claims about what is best for the child, it is easy to see how professionals can use certain language, terms, knowledge to gain control and dominance over decision making. For example terms might be used of social work intervention that include words such as 'professional', 'objective', 'risk analysis' whereas parents might mention terms such as 'my memory of', 'my feelings about' . Unconsciously, other professionals may be more influenced by professional input because it appears rational and analytical. Professionals can change this, by changing the words we use (avoiding social work jargon, giving parents prior preparation time and by giving them space to articulate their input into meetings in their own ways).

The position of the child in these meetings is subjugated through these processes, and the struggle for influence between professionals and parents 'crowds out' the space for the child. As a result of having less power and influence, and being continually undermined and excluded, children learn to stay quiet, and adults – those with power – are less disposed to give weight to their opinions if voiced. It follows that the habitus developed by children typify their lower status and power, that adults often acknowledge, legitimate, and reproduce social forms of domination that diminish the voice of the child. In child protection decision-making, this cycle has the potential to perpetuate itself until the voice of the child is drowned out. These micro power dynamics can be challenged, changed by the full inclusion of children and their voices in decision making fora, so that their voices are on a more equal footing with adult professionals and parents.

3. Conclusion

The purpose of this brief is to illustrate to professionals the range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks that inform understandings of the participation rights of children. Professionals need to interpret theory so that they can understand practice reality and act upon that reality thereby positively enhancing the lives of young children.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

Nelson Mandela, Former President of South Africa

4. Glossary

‘Haltung’ means ‘disposition’ and refers to the overall mindset, attitude, and demeanor of an individual. It is intrinsic to one’s ‘self’. ‘Haltung’ requires practitioners to engage holistically, bringing all aspects of their being – rational, emotional, and practical - into their professional relationships with children enabling the development of suitably close and authentic relationships.

‘Head-heart-hands’ refers to the engagement of professionals with children through the application of thinking, feeling, and doing, each being of equal importance in professional relationships where social workers use a combination of intellectual, practical, and emotional qualities.

‘The professional, personal, and private self’ refers to the fact that in developing close, authentic relationships, high levels of self-awareness and self-reflection are required. This involves distinguishing and displaying the professional and personal self at work but also keeping the private sphere of one’s life private.

‘The common third’ professionals recognize the potential in children and help them discover this too by creating strong, genuine relationships and learning situations in which children can experience their resourcefulness and develop new abilities. The focus here is on *being with* children and *doing things together with* them. This could be any activity, from playing football to making pancakes. The shared situation and/or experience is a vehicle for developing skills and talents in a space where there is a more equal partnership between child and adult, placing the child at the center.

‘Mutual respect, trust, and unconditional appreciation for children’ - all human beings are equal with rich and extraordinary potential, and considers children to be competent, resourceful, and active agents.

Appendix

Table 1 Literature regarding children’s participation, theoretical & conceptual frameworks

Theoretical and/or conceptual approach	References	Focus of the research study
Mobilities	Ferguson, H. (2016) What social workers do in performing child protection work: Evidence from research into face-to-face practice. <i>Child & Family Social Work</i> , 21(3), p.283-294.	Social workers’ relationships and communication with children/families in home visits
Goffman	Hadfield, M., Ruch, G., Winter, K., Cree, V. and Morrison, F. (2020) Social workers' reflexive understandings of their “everyday” communications with children. <i>Child & Family Social Work</i> , 25(2), p.469-477.	Social workers’ relationships and communication with children/families
Honneth	McCafferty, P. (2021) Children’s Participation in Child Welfare Decision Making: Recognizing Dichotomies, Conceptualizing Critically Informed Solutions, <i>Child Care in Practice</i> , https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2021.1896990	UNCRC Article 12
Sociology of childhood/agency/agentive capacity	Morrison, F. (2016) <i>Social Workers’ Communication with Children and Young People in Practice</i> . Glasgow: Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Service (IRISS).	Social workers’ relationships and communication with children/families
Digital anthropology	Pink, S., Ferguson, H. and Kelly, L. (2020) Child protection social work in COVID-19: reflections on home visits and digital intimacy. <i>Anthropology in Action</i> , 27(3), p.27-30.	Social workers’ relationships and communication with children/families in home visits
Social pedagogical concepts	Ruch, G., Winter, K., Cree, V., Hallett, S., Morrison, F. and Hadfield, M. (2017) Making meaningful connections: Using insights from social pedagogy in statutory child and family social work practice. <i>Child & Family Social Work</i> , 22(2), p.1015-1023.	Social workers’ relationships and communication with children/families

Psychosocial approaches	Ruch, G., Turney, D. and Ward, A. (2018) (second edition) <i>Relationship Based Social Work. Getting to the Heart of Practice</i> . London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.	Social workers' relationships and communication with children/families
Sennett	Ruch, G., Winter, K., Morrison, F., Hadfield, M., Hallett, S. and Cree, V. (2020) From communication to co-operation: Reconceptualizing social workers' engagement with children. <i>Child & Family Social Work</i> , 25(2), p.430-438	Social workers' relationships and communication with children/families
Sociology childhood/UNCRC	Winter, K. (2012) Ascertaining the perspectives of young children in care: Case studies in the use of reality boxes. <i>Children & Society</i> , 26(5), p.368-380.	Social workers' relationships and communication with children/families
Bourdieu	Winter, K. (2012) Ascertaining the perspectives of young children in care: Case studies in the use of reality boxes. <i>Children & Society</i> , 26(5), p.368-380	Social workers' relationships and communication with children/families in review meetings
Ecological approach	Whincup, H. (2017) What do social workers and children do when they are together? A typology of direct work. <i>Child & Family Social Work</i> , 22(2), p.972-980.	Social workers' relationships and communication with children/families
Participations models	Allcock, A (2018) Frameworks for child participation in social care, IRRIS https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/esss-outlines/frameworks-child-participation-social-care	Includes a review of literature and participation models by Hart, Lundy, Shier.

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