

'You've got to trust her and she's got to trust you': children's views on participation in the child protection system

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ABSTRACT

Participation by children in child protection remains a complex area of practice. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study exploring the views of 26 children, aged 6–17 years, about their participation in the child protection system in England. All of the children were subject to a child protection plan and were living at home at the time of interview. The children's understanding of the child protection process was categorized, and the majority of children, including the youngest, were found to be at least partially aware of the child protection process, often struggling to make sense of the professional intervention in their families on the basis of partial information. It is argued that decisions about children's involvement should take into account not only children's age and understanding, but be seen in the context of wider family dynamics. Participation in formal processes such as child protection conferences was experienced as difficult and emotive. The child's relationship with their social worker was central to meaningful participation.

INTRODUCTION

The present study examines the views of children and young people about the child protection process. Children's perspectives are scarce in the international research literature. Child protection work takes place within a context of ineliminable tensions involving the rights of parents, of children and of the right for the state to intervene in family life where serious concerns are raised about a child's welfare (Fox Harding 1991; Healy 1998). Within the triad of social worker, parents and child, the child arguably occupies the least powerful position. Child protection work is complex because of children's emotional ties to their parents and difficulties for professionals in achieving the right balance between working in partnership and exercising power to protect the child. It is not surprising if, in practice, parents and children sometimes align themselves against the social worker (Schofield & Thoburn 1996) or the social worker becomes absorbed in the parent's issues and loses sight of the child (Brandon

et al. 2009). Any consideration of children's participation in child protection must bear in mind the difficult context in which children's views are sought and children's participation enabled or thwarted.

Children's involvement in child protection has received international attention (Cashmore 2002; Darlington *et al.* 2010). The UN Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) was adopted by the UK in 1991. The rights enshrined within it have been summarized into three main types: participation (e.g. article 12), provision (e.g. article 24) and protection rights (e.g. article 3) (Lansdown 1994). The debate in child protection has been couched in terms of tensions between children's rights to protection and their rights to participation. Raynaert *et al.* (2009) identified an academic discourse about children's rights since the UNCRC, linked with the image of the 'competent child', and associated with the sociology of childhood paradigm. This considers children as social actors, as autonomous and as active agents constructing their lives (James & Prout 2005). This view

of childhood is sometimes contrasted with a view of the child as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection, a view attributed to models stemming from developmental psychology (Such & Walker 2005). However, a more sophisticated reading of developmental psychology can itself encompass a developmental approach to autonomy and agency (Smith 2007; Woodhouse 2009). The extent to which the tensions between children's right to participate and their right to protection are in opposition is debatable. Participation can be protective for vulnerable children, leading to increased confidence, self-efficacy and self-worth (Limber & Kaufman 2002; Schofield 2005). Not involving maltreated children may compound or reactivate feelings of powerlessness (Bell 2002). Maltreatment can be seen as a violation of a child's human rights. Having a voice and participating in decisions about that maltreatment are also human rights (Reading *et al.* 2009, p. 56). However, whilst protection and participation can go hand in hand, concerns have also been expressed that involving children in social work processes may be potentially harmful, e.g. by exposing them to hostility during meetings (Healy & Darlington 2009).

Protecting children in England involves the four key processes of assessment, planning, intervention and review. There is no mandatory reporting or substantiation process as in the USA or Australia (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2012). The UK equivalent of substantiated maltreatment is when a child becomes the subject of a child protection plan. This decision and the formulation of the plan for protection take place at a multi-agency child protection conference which family members, sometimes including the child, are invited to attend. If children do not attend, there is an expectation that their wishes and feelings are made known to the conference. This child protection system is in contrast to, e.g. Australia where the child protection process moves (somewhat differently in each state) from notification to investigation to substantiation and then either to care and protection orders or to family preservation services (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013). There is little emphasis on child participation and child involvement in decision-making rarely features in policy documentation (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013).

Changes in the child welfare law and policy in England and Wales reflect increasing recognition of children's perspectives. The Children Act 1989 includes the duty to ascertain children's wishes and feelings during care proceedings, and was amended by

the Children Act 2004, Section 53, which extended the duty to ascertain children's wishes and feelings to earlier stages of social work intervention before court involvement. The recent Munro Review of Child Protection refers to the importance of the 'rights' and 'experiences' of children in addition to their 'wishes' and 'feelings' (Munro 2011, p. 11). Recommendation Three of the review places emphasis on children's experiences of child protection services and whether children themselves feel they have been helpful. Children's views are to be sought during inspection of children's services, an important feedback mechanism to ensure greater import is given to children's views.

The importance of children's involvement in decision-making is threaded through the nationally agreed guidance for protecting children *Working Together* (Her Majesty's Government 2010) in place at the time the research was undertaken. This is to be achieved, primarily, through the use of relationships 'prioritising direct communication and positive and respectful relationships with children, ensuring the child's wishes and feelings underpin assessments and any safeguarding activities' (p. 32). The guidance also states the need to provide children with 'honest and accurate information' about professional views of their current situation as well as about future possible plans and actions (p. 33). The latest guidance for child protection *Working Together* (Her Majesty's Government 2013) reduces the volume of national procedures but reinforces children's rights to be worked with collaboratively, to understand what is happening and to have their views taken seriously (p. 9).

Although children's rights to participate are established in law and guidance, these are conditional in practice (Holland & Scourfield 2004). Legal provisions temper children's rights by adding the qualifier that the weight to be given to children's views should be assessed in the context of age and maturity/understanding. A crucial dilemma is what happens when the child's own view contradicts the professional view of what is in their best interests (Archard & Skivenes 2009). There is a danger that the child's disagreement may, in itself, be used to argue that the child is not competent (Thomas & O'Kane 1998). The extent to which children's views are sought, the weight which they are given, and the extent to which they participate in child protection processes, are dependent on adult professional judgement and practice. In order to strengthen children's position, some have stressed the importance of children being able to

access complaints procedures and independent advocacy services (Thomas & O'Kane 1998; Boylan & Dalrymple 2011).

One recognized factor that promotes children's participation is the quality of the relationship between the child and professional (Schofield & Thoburn 1996; Bell 2002; Rees *et al.* 2010). In a review of the literature, Mainey *et al.* (2009) summarized the qualities that children look for in those that help them, including empathy, being a good listener, warmth, honesty, an informal but professional approach, being interested, committed, respectful, reliable and willing to take action. Some research has focused specifically on children's involvement in meetings. Although children value the chance to attend meetings, their attendance at meetings does not guarantee meaningful participation and may be experienced as intrusive or tokenistic (Barford & Wattam 1991; Thomas & O'Kane 1999; Bell 2011). Conversely, a study of Norwegian care and protection cases found that the single most important factor making it more likely for children to have an influence on decision-making was attendance at a meeting (Vis *et al.* 2012).

The present study focuses on children involved in child protection, rarely a focus in research. Still rarer are studies with children subject to child protection processes and still living at home. Previous reviews of case files and assessments found that children's views were partially represented (Parton *et al.* 1997) and studies of advocacy services suggest that they are targeted on looked after children rather than those involved in child protection (Children's Commissioner for Wales 2003; Holland & Scourfield 2004). A study of the child protection system in Scotland found that children did not know what to expect before the investigation began, and that they appreciated being informed and involved from an early stage (Woolfson *et al.* 2010). The current study aims to add to the literature by exploring children's perspectives on the child protection process, including the views of younger children as well as adolescents.

METHODS

The study was a qualitative research study. A qualitative approach was chosen to access individual subjective experiences of child protection. Young people were involved in the research commissioning process and were part of the research advisory group. They contributed to recruitment leaflets, advised on ethical aspects of the research, contributed to the design of activity based interviews, co-facilitated a workshop

held with children and young people, and helped to produce a children's and young people's version of the final report. Young researchers were paid for their work on the project via a voucher system and could receive accreditation for a qualification recognizing their skills development.

The current paper focuses on the extent to which children understood and participated in the child protection process. The wider study also considered children's views of risk, what they felt kept them safe, and their views of the help their families received (Cossar *et al.* 2011). All of the children taking part in the study had a current child protection plan and were living at home. Participants were recruited from two local authorities, one a shire county and the other an outer London borough. Ethical approval was given by the (name of university) Ethics Committee and through the research governance procedures of the agencies involved.

A list of all children of the target age range with a child protection plan in each local authority area was drawn up. Six families identified by agencies were not contacted because of social workers' concerns. Parents are also important gatekeepers. It has been argued that children who can demonstrate understanding of research should be allowed to decide about their participation, without parental consent necessarily being a requirement (Coyne 2010). In the present study, active consent was sought from both parents and children. This was because of the sensitivity of the research area; researchers did not wish to increase the risk to the child if the parent found out about the research interview, either by accidental disclosure by the child, or if researchers needed to pass on information about abuse or neglect. Forty-three families were approached by letter and then a follow-up phone call. The initial letter was addressed to the parent who could make a decision about whether to pass on the enclosed letter to the child. Twenty-three parents contacted did not want their child to take part for varying reasons, including that the child was too young, there was too much going on, the parent said that their child had not been involved in the child protection process, the parent was angry at being contacted, the parent was not interested, and one who said the child could not consent due to a profound disability. Two children whose parents consented declined to take part.

A total of 26 children took part in the study, from 18 families. There were 13 girls and 13 boys. Their ages ranged from 6 to 17 years (mean 11.5). The mean age of the girls (12 years, 4 months) was slightly older

than that of the boys (10 years, 6 months). Just over three quarters of the children were white British (77%, 20 children). Twenty-three per cent (six children) were from minority ethnic groups. One of the children had moderate learning difficulties, one had mild learning difficulties. One other child had a statement of special educational needs. All were living with at least one birth parent. The categories of the children's plans were as follows: emotional abuse 15, neglect 7, physical abuse 3, sexual abuse 1. The mean duration of the current child protection plan was 13 months (range 1–23 months).

Adult researchers undertook activity-based interviews with children and young people and adult and young researchers ran a workshop. The interview study is the basis for the present analysis. The majority of interviews took place in the child's home. An information sheet was provided to the children and was also explained verbally. They were reminded that they could stop at any time and did not have to answer any questions. They were provided with a stop/go card based on a traffic sign and were asked to practise stopping the interview before we commenced (Gorin *et al.* 2008). Consent was viewed as an ongoing issue and researchers also paid attention to body language and tone of voice. Children were reminded that they did not have to tell researchers about issues if they were not comfortable talking, at the same time researchers were careful to ensure that they did not close down children's accounts because of their own discomfort. Children and young people were told that what they said would remain confidential unless the interviewer was worried about the child or another child's safety, when the interviewer would need to tell someone. One referral was made during the course of the research.

The adult role in the interview was akin to that Mayall (2000) describes, positioning oneself as an adult who is interested in and wants to learn from children. Interviews used a treasure chest box containing various activities planned with young people from the advisory group. In order to talk about children's participation, there was a set of 'helping people' cards, which included labelled picture cards of professionals that might visit children or whom children might go to visit. Extra blank cards were provided for other professionals a child might see. There were also cards for 'meetings' and 'court'. Each child was asked to choose the cards relevant to them and these were dealt out on the floor. The child picked the order they wanted to talk about them. This allowed the children to direct the interview to some extent and also provided a visual

prompt as to how long was left. The interview ended with less emotive conversational topics and the interviewer ensured that the child was not distressed before leaving. Children were given contact details of support services as well as a contact number for the research team.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymized. Thematic analysis was used. Codes were developed inductively working from the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). However, inevitably researchers drew upon background knowledge of existing typologies of participation (Arnstein 1969; Hart 1992; Thoburn *et al.* 1995; Shier 2001; Thomas 2002). One researcher initially read through the entire set of transcripts noting down initial ideas and developing codes. Then three researchers each coded the same three transcripts to refine the codes. The entire set of interviews were then coded using NVivo software.

The coding addressed children and young people's participation in the child protection process, including to what extent they felt able to give their views, whether they felt listened to, whether they had an input into reports and assessments, whether they attended and how they took part in meetings and to what extent they felt involved in decision-making. A case summary was also constructed for each interview. This approach allowed the data to be analysed in terms of cross-cutting themes, whilst also maintaining the complexity and integrity of each individual's situation.

FINDINGS

Participation in child protection processes

The importance of trusting relationships

In order to participate in a meaningful way, it is necessary for children to have the opportunity to give their opinions and to want to do so. A central theme was the importance of a trusting relationship with the social worker in allowing children and young people to voice their thoughts and feelings. Thirteen of the children described a good relationship with their social worker, whilst six did not and would not confide in them at all. Five gave a mixed response. The younger children who described positive relationships with social workers described them as '*kind*' or '*really nice*'. They wanted workers who would listen, before coming to a judgement or offering advice. Carol, aged 12, said of her social worker '*a good listener . . . she just listens and tries not to get the words muddled around*'.

Some of the older young people described the importance of the relationship and the need to work together with social workers to improve things in their families. To confide in the social worker, they needed to establish a relationship of trust. One of the young people explained the importance of trust as follows:

Because if you're not honest with her she can't really help you and like it'll make things harder, if you lie about something it will make things harder, because she does try and help you with it and it's not the truth and that it's not going to make things any easier and she won't trust you either, because you've got to trust her and she's got to trust you. Otherwise there's no point. (Louise, aged 15)

Minimal contact

In some cases, children described minimal contact with their social workers. Twelve out of 19 who answered said that they saw the social worker on their own. Older children were more likely than younger children to be seen on their own (three quarters of those aged 12 and over, compared with less than half of those aged 11 and below). The fact that seven of these children with a child protection plan said that they did not see social workers on their own is concerning. The fact that younger children were less likely to do so is worrying as the younger children tended to have a smaller network of professionals to turn to. Where the social worker appeared to have a case management role, rather than themselves seeing the child regularly, this was not appreciated by the children and young people. One young person said that she had two workers, referring to *'the social worker that decides everything . . . she doesn't really work with me much.'* Children disliked their social worker being a remote figure, particularly when they knew that the social worker had a key role in decision-making about their lives.

Feeling interrogated

Several children who did see their social workers regularly said that they could not confide in them and there were common features in the quality of these relationships. Firstly, children often felt pressurized if treated solely as a source of evidence. They felt interrogated by constant questioning. Amy, aged 13, commented,

It's annoying because like, if I'm having a good day then it's just like, because I know it's going to be the same old questions, is your dad still taking the stuff, and has he ever hit you it's just like shut up.

Linked to this was a feeling for some children that they had to be really careful about what they said around social workers. As Becky, aged 14, said,

Really it's just them two [the social worker and support worker] that I've got to watch what I say around.

Children and young people could be strategic about what they said to social workers, and a theme that several mentioned was their words being 'twisted',

Well, like when I say something, she'd try and twist it round so make it sound like stuff going on . . . like make them look better and us look worse. (Sadie, aged 12)

The children's descriptions of their relationships with social workers and of what they chose to say or not to say make clear the importance of a trusting relationship as a prerequisite for participation. Where children did not have trusting relationships with their social workers, either because they did not see them or because the relationship was viewed as adversarial and investigative, they were unlikely to describe a meaningful involvement in the child protection process.

Understanding of the child protection process

A separate coding was carried out of the children and young people's understanding of the child protection process. Without understanding meaningful participation is arguably limited. The children's understanding of child protection was rated into three categories:

Minimal understanding

Children in this category knew that they had a social worker and talked of them visiting, some were aware that they wrote things down. However, these children did not have any awareness of the social worker's role. If they knew that their parents went to meetings, they did not know what the meetings were about.

Partial understanding – piecing the jigsaw together

Children in this category knew something about the child protection process. Some had detailed knowledge of one aspect of it, or knew that their parents went to court, but were unsure why. They might be aware of potential consequences, such as going in to care, but were not sure what would lead up to it, or how it could be avoided. They seemed to be trying to piece together bits of information and struggled to fill in the gaps. Often they said that they got their information from family members rather than professionals, most often

parents and older siblings. Some of this information was inaccurate.

Clear understanding

Children and young people in this category were able to give a clear account of the child protection process. They described relevant meetings and could give a reasonable description of a child protection plan. Some could give a reasonable account of different types of abuse and discussed which had been applied to their family and to what extent they agreed with it (Table 1).

Table 1 Children's understanding of the child protection process in relation to age

No. of children*	Minimal	Partial	Clear	Total
Less than 10	2	7	0	9
11–13	0	6	1	7
14–17	0	1	7	8
Total	2	14	8	24

*It was impossible to rate two of the interviews as the child did not engage with that part of the interview. These were children aged 10 and 17.

Older children were more likely to have a clear understanding of child protection. The largest number of children was in the partial understanding category. It is of interest that the majority of children less than 10 had a partial understanding; they were trying to make sense of professional involvement in their families, sometimes with confusing results. The categories will now be explored further using the qualitative data.

Minimal understanding

One of the two children in this group, Jack, was 9 and spoke with high regard for his social worker, whom he trusted and felt was helping him, *'she comes round and see if I'm alright, talks to mum, talks to dad and talks to me'*. He knew his social worker wrote things down and said that he sometimes was asked to go and play in the garden so the social worker could talk to his mum. He had not heard of a child protection plan and did not know whether his mum and dad went to any meetings. In this case, his mum wanted him to be protected from knowledge about the process and he was happy that things were improving in his family. He did not show any confusion or concern about the social work intervention.

Partial understanding

This was the largest group of children and they had varying experiences, but tended to have detailed knowledge about some aspects of child protection, and less knowledge about others. Marcus, aged 13, said that his parents were going to court every month and gave a detailed account of how he and his siblings were going to be placed if he went into care. He had asked his social worker about this and reported that he'd been told, *'Don't worry it'll never happen'*. Most of Marcus' knowledge was about the legal process, and he had not heard of a child protection conference or a plan. He did not seem to relate what was happening in court to his social worker's involvement.

Ben, aged 10, talked about his name being on a list, which he described as *'a list where people they don't think are quite safe names go on it'*. He said he felt sad about his name being on this list and thought it had been put on when he was at school. He got his information from his parents. He said he sometimes went to child protection meetings with his parents and sat outside with one of them, whilst the other went in, which could be *'a bit scary'*. He was not told by anyone what went on in them, but could be waiting outside for up to an hour. He said that actually he was not allowed to know, *'if mum and dad tell us then [the social worker] will take us and put us into care'*.

All the children in this group were actively striving to make sense of the information they had. They could give a coherent account of some aspect of the process but not of the whole. The process had an emotional impact. Some children spoke of tension, and were scared, but unsure what was going on. Many children picked up information from parents and older siblings, as well as other children, which might not be accurate. Whilst it is not possible to know from the data what information and explanation professionals had given these children, it was clear that the children were struggling to make sense of what was going on and, in some cases, their misunderstanding was a cause of distress.

Clear understanding

The young people in this group were older, and most had read the leaflets and been given information by their social workers which they could recount coherently. They often saw reports and assessments, could describe a child protection conference and understood that they had a plan.

It's a plan of your life like what happens in it and how they are going to help you, like a meeting, appointments and stuff. (Michelle, aged 14)

Some could talk about the category of the plan and said to what extent they agreed with the professionals' perception of their family.

Most of the young people in this group had heard of a child protection plan and mentioned specific provisions in their own plans, such as having extra time in exams, or having to attend health care check-ups.

INVOLVEMENT IN FORMAL PROCESSES

The children were asked whether they knew about reports and assessments. Of 18 children who talked about reports and assessments, 6 said that they saw all or part of them and 12 said that they did not. All of the children who had seen a report were in the 12–17 age group. However, younger children often knew of their existence. Dominic, aged 10, said, *'They just put it in the report and they don't even tell our family what they're going to write, so that's what I don't like about the social'*. Only three young people discussed their reports with their social worker before a meeting. Twenty of the children talked about meetings and of these, 11 said that they were invited to go and 9 said that they were not. Some of the children who had not been invited wanted to go. Most of the children did not talk of other ways of having their views represented. Of 17 children who responded, 7 had seen the child protection information leaflets and 10 said that they did not recognize them. This suggests that existing ways of promoting children's understanding and involvement are not being implemented successfully.

The 10 children who had attended meetings (either a child protection conference or a core group meeting) ranged in age from 9 to 15 years. These children rarely felt able to ask questions and five out of eight who responded said that they were not satisfied with their level of participation. Only two felt even partly listened to at the meeting. Some of the young people did not feel adequately prepared or supported. Some felt that their chosen supporter, often a family member, was not welcome. Nicola, aged 13, said *'I'd rather go with someone from my family and my parents usually can't go. But they got angry and didn't like who I brought. I could tell they didn't want him there because of the way they looked at him. They wanted me to bring the headmaster instead but I wanted someone from my family'*.

During the meetings, it could be difficult for children's voices to be heard. One young person was frustrated because, *'every time I went to speak, someone*

interrupted me and that really annoyed me so I was like right I'm going, I've got to get to school' (Heather, aged 15). Some of the young people commented on the awkwardness of being asked questions in front of parents. Zoe, aged 15, was angry to be asked whether her mum was a good mum, *'I felt I had to say she was'*. Another young person Lucy, aged 14, said *'I didn't lie but there was a sense of awkwardness when you know you should say something but you don't want to say it in front of certain people'*. Four young people spoke about the emotional impact. One described it as *'nerve wracking'* and another said, *'I did go once but it was awful . . . they were just all talking and I didn't understand what they were saying. It was about me. I didn't really enjoy it that much'*. Of all the children who were aware of meetings, the outcome was explained to six, and a further eight said that it had not been explained.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study sought the views of a group of children and young people about whom there are current or recent child protection concerns, whose perspective is rarely heard. The study does have limitations. There may be important differences between the young people taking part in the study and children whose parents refused their consent because they were angry at being contacted or children whose social workers vetoed their participation on the study. The children are likely to have chosen carefully what they shared with researchers, mirroring their descriptions of choosing carefully what they said to social care professionals. Further research with younger children and children with disabilities may generate themes that are either absent from or less well developed in this research. It may be that these groups have fewer opportunities to participate in child protection processes. The perspectives of these two groups are lacking in the literature and further studies could help to address this deficit.

The children's accounts reinforce existing findings about the crucial importance of a trusting relationship with the social worker (Bell 2002, 2011; Rees *et al.* 2010), and this relationship aspect of the work could not be delegated to another worker as the young people recognized that the social worker had the power to make decisions about them. The findings suggested a trusting relationship could offer opportunities to promote confidence, feelings of safety and self-efficacy (Schofield 2005). However, without a trusting relationship, some of the children and young people had no opportunity in which to explore and

express their opinions and feelings, let alone feel that those opinions had an impact on decision-making.

Most of the children in the study, including those less than 10, had some knowledge about the child protection process and were actively striving to make sense of it. It has been argued that the exercise of children's rights to participate depends on adult judgements about their capacity (Thomas & O'Kane 1998; Holland & Scourfield 2004; Archard & Skivenes 2009). Professional guidance suggests that social workers should take account of the child's age and understanding when making judgements about children's participation. This study suggests that taking account of a child's age and understanding is necessary but not sufficient in assessing what level of participation in social work processes is appropriate. It highlights that young children, as well as adolescents, need information from professionals about the child protection process appropriate to their individual circumstances, and the chance to participate. The child is at the centre of a system involving other family members, professionals and peers, and the complex interactions between them must be taken into account (Bronfenbrenner 1976). The social worker is only one source of information and children in the study were getting information from older siblings, parents and peers. The relationship between the child and social worker may be undermined if the child has information about the child protection process from other sources but the social worker is not speaking to the child about it. If the child does not trust the social worker, the social worker will be less able to support them. Helping a child to understand and participate in the child protection process may help the social worker to protect the child.

The young people's experience of formal participation in child protection conferences and core group meetings was largely negative. They found them stressful and did not feel listened to. Where children attended, they did not feel well prepared and supported. In some cases, they were asked difficult questions in front of their parents. The findings echo other research about children's experiences of meetings (Barford & Wattam 1991; Healy & Darlington 2009). Closer attention should be given to the complexity of children's participation in such meetings, which can be enabling but can also be a disempowering experience.

Participation cannot be reduced to a procedural requirement but must be based on the quality of the relationships established between the child and professionals. Practitioners need to be knowledgeable

about children's rights and child development, to have good skills in communicating with children (Schofield & Thoburn 1996) and to pay explicit attention to issues of power. Supporting social work practice in a time of austerity is a challenge. Social workers need to work in organizations that support social workers, as well as family support workers, to do direct work with children. This fits with relationship-based practice, where the relationship between child and professional is considered central both to gauging needs and as a means of providing help (Ruch 2005). Gauging a child's needs includes a discussion of the sense that the child is making of the family situation but also of the social work intervention. If children's views about services are routinely sought in inspection processes (Munro 2011), this may encourage a culture of participation.

The current study echoes other research in suggesting that children will be primarily reliant on social workers to exercise their rights to participation. It is important to provide access to advocacy so that children are not solely dependent on the quality of that relationship, and there should be robust complaints procedures (Thomas & O'Kane 1998; Boylan & Dalrymple 2011). There is also an important role for the Child Protection Chair in seeking the child's views not only about their family situation but also about the services they are receiving and whether they find them helpful. Providing checks and balances in the child protection system to promote participation is important. This study suggests that however much participation is embedded in policy and procedures, key to its realization in practice is the quality of the relationships established between social workers and children.

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