Introducing the Child-Case-Context model

In the TLC research, we found that each encounter or meeting between a child or young person and their social worker is unique. It is influenced and shaped by a multitude of factors – like the child's age, whether they have a disability and how this affects their communication, the relationship between the child and the social worker (have they just met or have they known each other for some time?), whether the meeting is planned or unplanned and where the meeting takes place. The breadth, nature and the complexity of the issues that social workers and children communicate about, as well as the wider family dynamics are also influential to each encounter.

How you plan your communication with a 6 year old child who's been told by their parent that you're going to take them into care if they speak up about what's been going on at home will be very different to how you plan to communicate with a young person who's been living with foster carers for the last 10 years and is about to move into alternative accommodation. Likewise, the wider context also matters. Social workers are themselves part of the context, and their age, ethnicity, gender and background affect what happens in the communicative encounter. So do the many other people and agencies that form part of the bigger picture. Issues like poverty, housing, and the organisational context in which social workers practise and the wider national political and local organisational context (like austerity and welfare reform) are also hugely important for communication between social workers and children.

To help make sense of these issues and the impact they have on communication with children, we have developed the *Child-Case-Context* model. The model is informed by ecological systems theory and recognises that individuals, interactions, relationships and environment all influence one another – and so, they affect how social workers and children communicate with one another.

The *Child-Case-Context* model enables you to make explicit the complexity of the communicative encounters that take place with children. It can help you to articulate what and how factors might affect communication with individual children - both positively and negatively. It encourages you to reflect on these and how you might develop your practice with children.

A closer look at the Child-Case-Context model

So let's take a closer look at the *Child-Case-Context* model. At first glance, the model looks simple, but as we explore more deeply, you will see how complex communicative encounters with children and young people can be. It's important to note from the outset that while the concepts are presented separately, there will always be a degree of overlap and relationship between them. A political context of austerity, for example, will have implications for levels of poverty, which, in turn, have consequences for child welfare. Similarly, it has been known for years now that issues such as domestic abuse or substance misuse have major implications for children's well-being and how a child and their family may respond or react each other and to you.
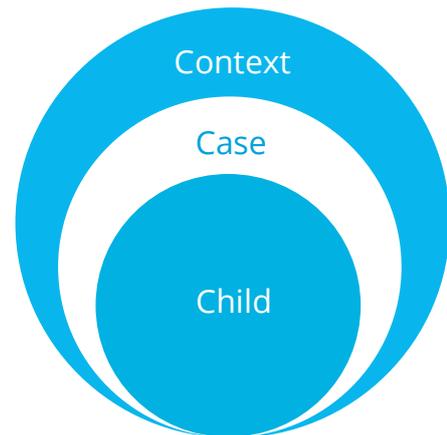
An Ecological Model for Communication

Child

Things to consider: the age and stage of the child or young person, any disability or health problems, their ethnicity, language (is English their first language or not? do they have any communication, educational or developmental difficulties?), their gender, the relationships they have with siblings, peers and parents, their previous relationship with you or with another social worker, how you think about children and childhood (is the child seen as a competent being with capacity or do they need protection? Or are both true?).

Case

Things to consider: the nature of the referral (statutory versus voluntary, early intervention or risk assessment, routine monitoring or crisis?), who made the referral and why, what else is going on in the family (with siblings, domestic abuse, substance misuse, mental or physical health problems, caring needs of other family members etc.), how long the family has been involved with social services, what kind of work the social worker is doing with the child, how the wider family feels about this.

Context

Things to consider: the individual social worker (their experience and skills, personality and personal & professional background, their gender, ethnicity & age, their values & attitudes etc.), the social work agency/ organisation and its institutional & organisational environment, what other agencies are involved (police, school, youth club etc.), the cultural and socio-political environment, and other structural pressures on the child and family, including stresses related, for example, to poverty, poor housing, racism, discrimination.

Exploring how social workers
and children communicate

Using the Child-Case-Context model in practice

We'd like you to see this as a way of thinking through your communication with children and young people in the future. You could use the three concepts as headings and write down your thoughts next to each. Or maybe you'd prefer to use a grid like this:

Child	Case	Context
Sam, aged 8 years is a white girl from a Polish background	Risk assessment – referral from school because of large 'grab-mark' bruise on Sam's arm	The family has been rehoused recently from another part of the UK; living in temporary accommodation
Sam lives with her mother, brother aged 9 & sister aged 11 years; she has no contact with her father	History is not fully known yet. Sam's teacher reports that she has been concerned about Sam's poor attendance and tiredness in class	You are a white, male, newly-qualified social worker; you don't know the teacher and don't feel confident that you have a full grasp of local resources
Sam is quiet in class and seems to be behind with reading and writing	Her mother is working part-time as a cleaner. She missed the recent parent-teacher's meeting at school	Supportive grandparents are still living in Poland
Sam seems fearful of adults	There seems to have been no previous social work involvement with the family, but this is still not yet fully clear	Possible additional relevant factors may include racism and discrimination, as well as the impact of poverty and poor housing
What else?	What else?	What else?

Now that we have identified some of the issues that might be important, we then want you think about how these factors may influence how you communicate with a child.

- Trust can be transferred from parent to child – how can you encourage Sam's mum to trust you? Should you arrange to meet Sam and mum together the first time? What about the grandparents, what role might they play, even through Skype?
- Need to explain to Sam what a social worker is – and how she can get in touch with you. How can you do this in a way that makes sense and is unthreatening?
- Might take a while for Sam's mother to feel comfortable with you taking Sam out on her own – can you think of other ways to talk to Sam privately?
- The only place at their flat where you can talk privately with Sam is in her bedroom. Is this acceptable? What might be an alternative? Library? Family Centre?
- You don't really know Sam at all – how can you find out more about her? What is she interested in? What is she good at? How can you weave this into how you communicate?

The bottom line as far as the model is concerned is that your communication will be affected by all three concepts, so you need to attend to all of them, all the time. This is far from easy in the real world of social work practice!

Theoretical ideas underpinning the Child-Case-Context model

We have already said that the model draws on an ecological systems perspective. This is, of course, not a new idea. As long ago as 1920, Nora Milnes, then Director of the Edinburgh School of Social Study and Training, argued that 'a wise understanding of social influence is necessary for the solving of child health problems'. This theme re-emerged some 50 years later, when Urie Bronfenbrenner claimed that it isn't enough to focus in only on the child; we also need to pay close attention to environmental and societal influences on child development. Bronfenbrenner's work connects sociological ideas of structure and environment with psychological ideas of personality and development; it has been influential across the world in informing policy and practice in children's services.

The ecological systems perspective is closely aligned to that of relationship-based practice. This urges us to see the individual in context, the psychological and the social, because 'neither makes sense without the other', as Gillian Ruch (2009) asserts. The concept of relationship-based practice can be seen as a contemporary re-working of the earlier psycho-social model; as well as attending to the uniqueness of the inter-personal encounter, it also places particular emphasis on reflexivity (use of self), and the relationship through which communication is channeled.

Another pillar on which our model is built is that of the strengths' perspective. Dennis Saleeby (2012) coined this term, reminding us that individuals (adults and children alike) must be seen as whole people with strengths and coping mechanisms that should be respected and valued. Even when the going gets tough, there are opportunities for connection and learning for us and for those with whom we are working; authentic communication may not always be easy, but it is worth striving for – as Saleeby insists, 'every environment is full of resources'.

Our fourth contention is that as every communicative encounter is unique, so every child is unique. The idea of person-centred practice (see Rogers, 2012) is at the heart of UK policy and is demonstrated, for example, in the Scottish government's GIRFEC approach, which asserts that there can be no level set of wellbeing that all children should achieve; instead, each child should be helped to achieve their full potential. If every person is different, then we must be flexible in our approach - there can be no 'quick-fix', set of rules or best practice for communicating with children and young people.

Exploring how social workers
and children communicate

The final concept that underpins our model is that of critically reflective practice. Although some of us intuitively get it right some of the time, good professional practice must be learned and it must be practised; it is through experience and through reflection in-and-on action (Schon, 1983) that social workers learn to practise better. But reflection on its own is not enough. We have to acknowledge that the 'real world' of practice is inherently messy, complex, ambiguous and uncertain. Moreover, our position as social workers means that there is always a political and ethical dimension to what we are doing. As Carolyn Taylor advises, we need to take a 'longer, harder look at practice,' rather than searching for technocratic solutions. This is what we have tried to do in the TLC project, as we have sought to offer a useful resource to social work, while at the same time continuing to assert the complexities and to ask questions about what social work is and why.

Dr Fiona Morrison and Professor Viv Cree
with the TLC team
November 2016

References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Milnes, N. (1920). *Child Welfare from the Social Point of View*, London: J.M.Dent and Sons, Ltd.

Rogers, C.R. (2012) *Client-Centred Therapy*, new edition, London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.

Ruch, G. (2009). 'Identifying the critical in a relationship-based model of reflection, *European Journal of Social Work*, 12: 349-62.

Saleeby, D. (2012). *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*, 6th edition, Boston MA: Pearson Education.

Schon, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, London: Temple Smith.

Scottish Government (2016) *Understanding Wellbeing*, www.gov.scot/girfec

Taylor, C. (2013) 'Critically reflective practice', in Gray, M. and Webb, S.A. (2013) *The New Politics of Social Work*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY
PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD

THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

US
UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Queen's University Belfast

E·S·R·C
ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

Exploring how social workers and children communicate