



What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**

SHARED DECISION-MAKING MEETINGS PROGRAMME THEORY

Children and young people involvement





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About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social

care sector. We generate, collate and make accessible the best evidence for practitioners, policy makers and practice leaders to improve children's social care and the outcomes it generates for children and families.

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The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University is concerned with all aspects of community responses to social need in children and

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Through carrying out a rapid realist review of shared decision-making meetings to reduce the need for children to be in care (see “What is good practice in delivering meetings? Involving families meaningfully in decision making to keep children safely at home: A rapid realist review”), the additional considerations necessary for including children and young people became apparent. An important emerging consideration was the way in which the delivery of shared decision-making meetings could meaningfully involve all children and young people. This is closely linked to supporting children’s rights to participation in decisions that affect them (see for example The Children Act 2004). This involves understanding how and when to involve children and young people in meetings, and how, if they are not in attendance at the meeting, their views are represented, and influence decision-making. Moreover, the involvement of the child’s voice in meetings, either directly through their participation, or through them providing a way of communicating their views (i.e. through a poem, a story, a picture), can be a powerful motivator for change for families.

Much of the programme theory presented in the main review (see “What is good practice in delivering meetings? Involving families meaningfully in decision making to keep children safely at home: A rapid realist review”) is relevant also to the inclusion of children and young people, but a separate programme theory was developed to highlight the different practice considerations needed when including children and young people in meetings. In particular, the contexts that facilitate or inhibit children’s involvement may be different

than for adults (such as their age or stage of development, or the issues that are being discussed). Additionally, the outcomes that may come from child/young person involvement may be different than those that may be the goals of family involvement more generally (see Figure 1). For example, a young child would not be seen as a key ‘actor’ in reducing the need for entry to care, but their understanding of the situation is an important outcome in itself.

1. Findings

1.1 Important circumstances

Within the children's social care system, there are important circumstances that impact upon the involvement of children and young people in shared decision-making meetings. Two particularly important circumstances were highlighted through stakeholder consultation: child protection involvement and children in care.

Child Protection involvement: Where social workers are involved with families due to a concern about a risk of significant harm to a child, there may be hesitance in involving a child in meetings where sensitive topics such as addiction or domestic violence may be discussed. Moreover, the weight of the child's view regarding where they want to live may be minimised by the concern for the child's safety.

Children in care: In the UK, when a child is in care, it may be that there is shared parental responsibility between a local authority and a parent or carer. This can impact on how decisions are made and add to the number of processes and procedures involved in making even relatively minor decisions. Children and young people are always invited to attend these meetings.

1.2. Key mechanisms: Overview

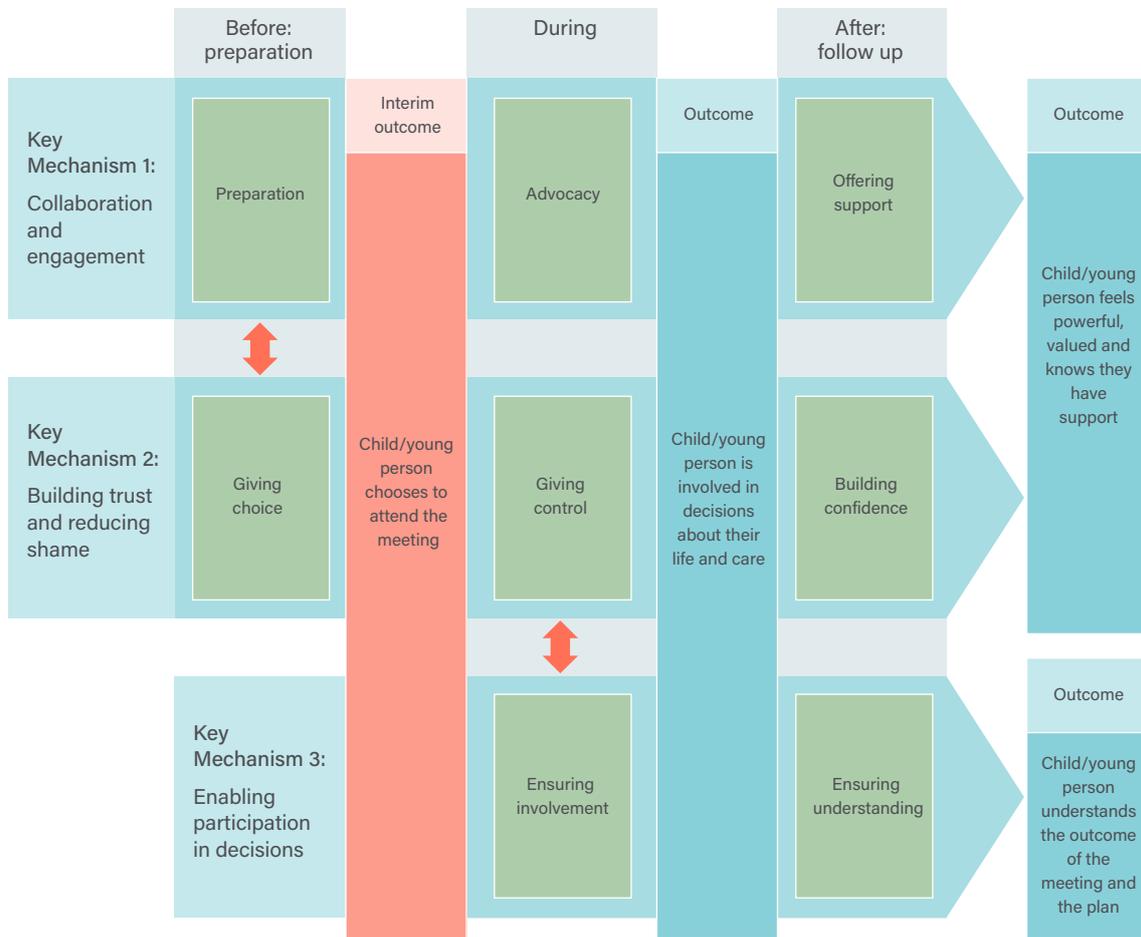
The programme theory maps key mechanisms through which meetings in children's social care can work to involve children and young people in decision making. The theory highlights three key mechanisms through which this outcome can be achieved, demonstrating context-mechanism-outcome chains. Important contexts are discussed throughout the programme theory that can help to enable the mechanisms to work, or which can be inhibitory. The meeting process takes place in three stages (before, during and after the meeting), with each contingent on the success of the previous stage.

Mechanism is defined as how the intervention resource (e.g. shared decision-making meetings) interacts with how individuals think and feel (e.g. social workers, parents, families, children) to bring about changes in thinking, feeling, or behaviour that influences whether the intervention 'works' to achieve its intended outcome (See Appendix 9 for full glossary of realist terms).

The following describes three key mechanisms which help to achieve the three outcomes outlined above. These mechanisms help us to understand how and when to involve children and young people in meetings, and how, if they are not in attendance at the meeting, their views can be represented, and can influence decision-making. These are pathways which articulate the theory behind which these meetings could work. Further, there are notable contexts which facilitate or inhibit children's involvement which may differ from adults (such as their age or stage of development, or the issues that are being discussed). Particular enablers and barriers were also identified as affecting a child/young person's participation in shared-decision making meetings and are discussed alongside the relevant mechanisms in which they moderate. However, if such barriers can be successfully managed, then they should not inhibit a child/young person's involvement.

Figure 1 shows the three key mechanisms in the blue boxes: 1) Collaboration and engagement; 2) Building trust and reducing shame; 3) Enabling participation in decisions. These can be seen as pathways that operate across the three stages of the intervention, which are shown in the grey boxes of the diagram. The green boxes indicate what people do within the process in order to activate the mechanisms. The dark blue boxes show the interim outcome/mechanism and the main outcomes.

Figure 1: Overarching programme theory for children and young people's participation in shared decision-making meetings



1.3. Key mechanisms

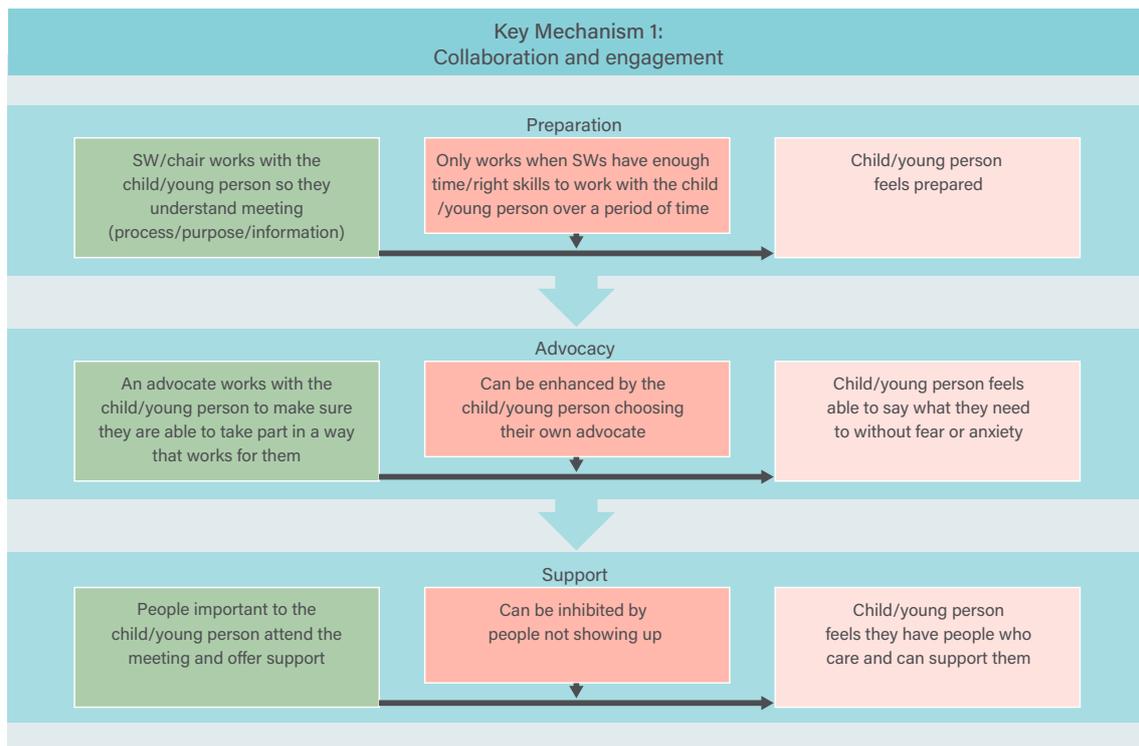
Here the key mechanisms are broken down in more detail to show what people do (shown in green boxes), how that interacts with how children/young people feels or what they know (shown in light pink boxes), and also key moderators that can enhance or inhibit these mechanisms (shown in salmon pink boxes).

Key mechanism 1: Collaboration and engagement

The first key mechanism is collaboration and engagement. At each stage of the meeting process (before, during and after) different intervention resources (what people do – shown in green boxes)

interact with people, and how they feel to activate this key mechanism. The pathway through which this key mechanism works to reach the outcome is discussed below. Essentially, this mechanism is concerned with what social workers and other professionals do to enable true collaboration with children and young people in a meeting, and how this creates engagement in the meeting process. Collaboration can form an important part of the process in involving the child/young person in the meeting. If the social worker spends time preparing the child/young person to understand what the meeting is about and informing them of what may be said about them then they can be meaningfully engaged in the process.

Figure 2: Key mechanism 1 – collaboration and engagement



Preparation: If the social worker/coordinator works with the child/young person to find out what they would like from the meeting then the meeting can focus on the child's needs. This role can also be carried out by an advocate. This can be facilitated by the social worker/coordinator/advocate having the necessary skills to engage the child/young person and the social worker/ coordinator spending enough time with the young person before the meeting. This can help to build a good relationship with the child/young person. The skills of the social worker/coordinator which can enhance this process include: excellent listening, flexible communication, being open, and not raising unrealistic expectations. Importantly, the social worker/coordinator needs to have the skill of being able to work directly with children and young people of all ages and communicate in a way that is appropriate for them. This can be a source of anxiety for some practitioners and should be part of training for delivering meetings in a way that can include children and young people.

Preparing and listening to the child/young people in this way requires the social worker/coordinator to spend time with the child/young person over several visits so that they are fully informed about the purpose of the meeting. The preparation stage is also an important arena in which children and young people can be offered choices about how the meeting progresses, which can enhance how collaborative the meeting feels. This is discussed through key mechanism 2 (see figure 4).

Advocacy: It can be important for a child/young person to have an advocate or someone they trust available to meet with prior to the meeting to hear their views and discuss how they will be presented during the meeting. An advocate can support the child/young person to say what they need to, or speak on their behalf when there may be difficult things to say to family members. The child/young

person can therefore be reassured that they will be able to make their point even if they do not want to speak or are nervous about speaking. Considering the use of creative methods such as drawing can also assist in involving the child/young person even where they cannot attend and allow their views to be represented during the meeting. This may also include involving them via alternative methods such as Skype or recording the meeting, if the child/ young person is unable or does not wish to attend.

Support: On the assumption that the child/young person feels prepared, then the child/young person may feel comfortable, prepared and indeed confident to attend and engage in the meeting. If the child or young person has a positive relationship with the social worker/coordinator or a person they trust who will also be at the meeting, then this can allow the child/young person to feel safe in attending the meeting by knowing they have support. Giving the child/young person options, such as being able to leave the room or being able to call a 'time out' can help the child/young person feel able to manage their involvement if the meeting becomes overwhelming for them. This can be particularly important where there is conflict in the family, or between family members and professionals, or if difficult conversations occur. For example, family members saying in front of the child/young person that they cannot/will not care for them, causing the child/young person to feel rejected.

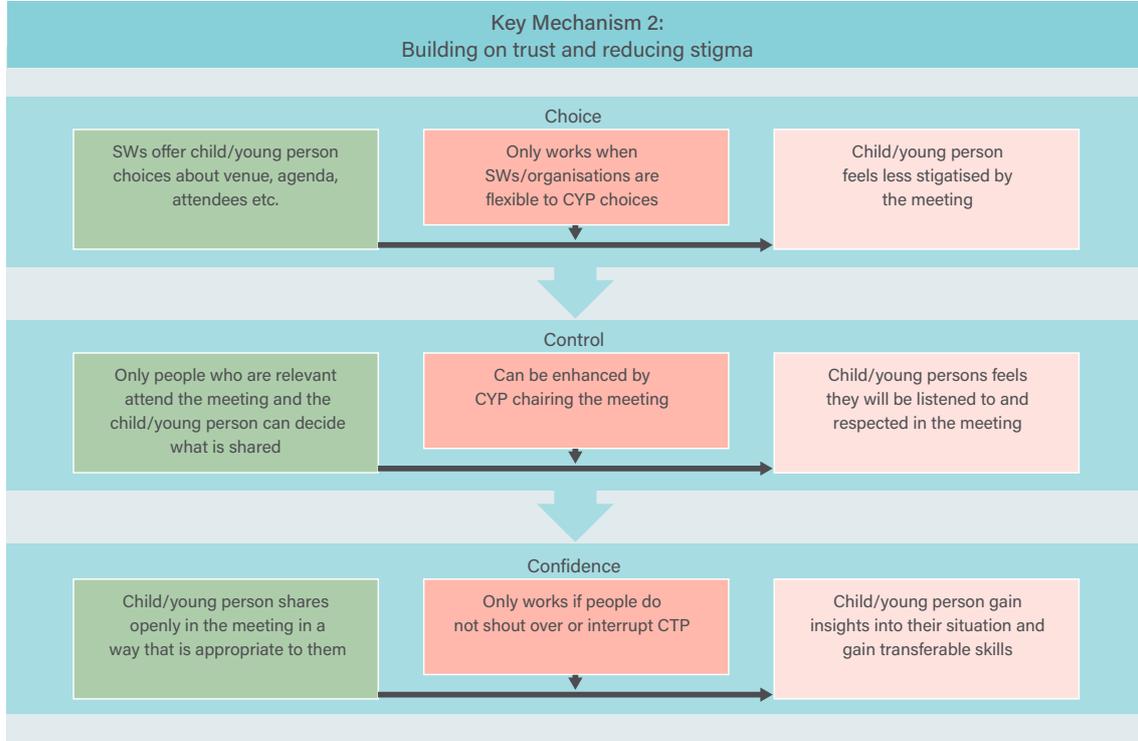
However, if the child/young person expects family members, or specific professionals to turn up for the meeting and they do not attend, the child/young person can feel let down and annoyed. This forms part of the preparation phase of social workers not raising the child/young person's expectations and helping them to understand the reality of what might happen in the meeting.

Key mechanism 2: Building trust and reducing shame

Building trust between social workers and children/young people can be an important mechanism for

children/young people to feel able to participate in a meeting in a way that is safe and does not increase their anxiety.

Figure 3: Key Mechanism 2 - Building trust and reducing stigma



Choice: If children and young people are given choices over various aspects of the meeting, then they can feel involved in the process. These choices could include: whether they wish to attend the meeting; what information is shared and in front of whom; where and when the meeting will be held; who will be present at the meeting; whether they would like to chair the meeting; and allowing them the opportunity to leave at any point if they feel uncomfortable. It can be particularly important for young people to feel like they have some control over which of their information will remain private.

The environment in which the meeting is held can also be important. If the child/young person is given choices over when and where the meeting is held; for example making the decision for the meeting to be held outside the school environment then they can also feel less stigmatised by attending the meeting. In addition, the way the room feels can impact on how anxious the child/young person feels. If the space is designed in a way that allows a child/young person to leave/change their

involvement, then they can feel less anxious. This can involve having space for the child/young person to leave the room, or having toys for children to play with if they do not want to take a central role at that point in the meeting.

Consideration may also need to be given to the potential attendees and group dynamics within the meeting and how this could impact upon the child/young person's attendance. For instance, depending on whether there are disputes and/or tension in the family can hinder some of these positive feelings for the child/young person, particularly if they know that certain people will be present and therefore feel uneasy with where their loyalty lies. In some cases, police may be asked to attend meetings due to potential conflict arising or in cases where a perpetrator and victim are involved, meaning the child/young person, and indeed family members, can feel wary or nervous speaking in front of the police. Consequently, if these factors cannot be managed, then the child/young person may make the decision not to attend the meeting.

Control: If the child/young person is given choices about how they want to be involved in the meeting then their voice can be heard in a way that is appropriate to their age/development and requests. If the child/young person has been adequately prepared for the meeting and given choices over the different aspects of the meeting, it can allow them to feel a sense of ownership and control by knowing that the meeting is about them and they have been involved in its organisation. This feeling of ownership can be enhanced if the social worker/coordinator is honest about the purpose of the meeting, yet inhibited if professionals set expectations on how children should behave during the meeting.

In addition, where possible, only having relevant people who are known to the child attend the meeting can make the child feel more comfortable. This could mean having the relevant people brought into the meeting only for the relevant parts (e.g. discussions related to health or school) so that the child/young person does not feel that information is being shared unnecessarily to those who may not need to know it. It also includes the child/young person having a specified role in the meeting (such as chairing their own meeting or writing down key points for the plan) and having an advocate who the child/young person has chosen and who will support them in presenting their views. Such actions can reduce the child/young person's anxiety and lead to them feeling comfortable in being able to share their views. A reduction in anxiety can stem from the child/young person feeling that the meeting is about them, that they are in control over how they participate, and that they will be listened to and respected when sharing their views.

Confidence: If a child/young person's anxiety is reduced then they can feel more comfortable sharing their views during the meeting. This is helped if the child/young person is involved at their own pace, is given enough time to speak and is asked for their views throughout the meeting as opposed to a given point. Upon sharing their views, and everyone else in the meeting sharing their views, the child/young person can gain insights and realisations about themselves and their caregivers and understand options regarding their own care. Having this insight can allow them to feel that they are better placed to make decisions about their own care and say, with more confidence, what they want to say and what they would need in order to succeed. This increased confidence can translate into other areas of a child/young person's life as they can feel proud of their ability to speak up in a meeting and feel powerful. However, this confidence can be inhibited if adults interrupt, speak over the child/young person or shout, consequently silencing the child/young person's voice.

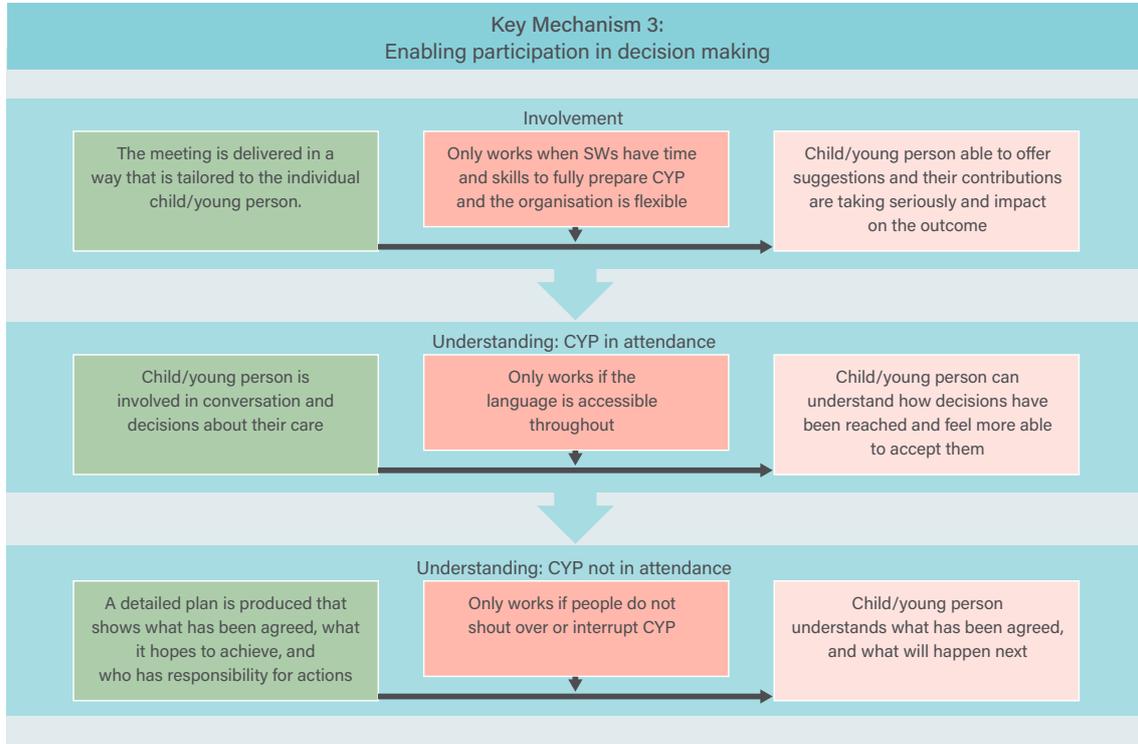
As can be seen, key mechanisms 1 and 2 work closely together – for example, young people being involved in the preparation of the meeting allows for them to be given choices about what occurs, which increases collaboration, and also can work to reduce the stigma of the meeting. These two mechanisms in turn help to enable key mechanism 3.

Key mechanism 3: enabling participation in decision making

One of the main outcomes from shared decision-making meetings is to enable children and young

people to be involved in making important decisions about their own lives and care and ensuring that their voice is heard in any decisions that are made about them.

Figure 4: Key mechanism 3 - enabling participation in decision making



Involvement: Both other key mechanisms feed into enabling the child/young person to be involved actively in the meeting. Assuming the pre-meeting preparatory process with the child/young person has been successful and the child/young person is feeling positive about attending, the child/young person is then more likely to attend the meeting. For them to feel able to actively take part in the meeting however, requires further actions to set the right tone for the meeting. This includes tailoring the language and environment to the individual through the use of child-friendly language, considering any additional needs that a child/young person may

have and talking directly to the child/young person, rather than about them as if they were not present.

This can mean that the child/young person is able to be more actively involved in helping the plan to be successful. One potential way to do this is through being involved in monitoring the plan. In addition, children and young people may feel a sense of relief and happiness, particularly if they have not experienced meetings in this way before. In this respect, children/young people may be more likely to attend meetings in the future and continue to engage with their social worker.

Understanding (CYP in attendance): If the meeting has been conducted in a way that is adapted to the individual child/young person, then they should be able to understand the outcome/plan in the meeting. This involves other participants ensuring that they are regularly checking that everyone including the child/young person has been able to understand what has been going on, and that the language used is appropriate. Having been involved in conversations and decision making can enable the child/young person to understand not only the decision that has been reached, but also how those decisions were reached and why. This can be important in helping the child/young person to accept decisions that they may not fully agree with.

Understanding (CYP not in attendance):

Alternatively, for a child/young person who does not wish to speak or who is not present, it is important that the same amount of preparation and feedback is offered as it is to a child/young person who attends a meeting. The child/young person

should feel informed and represented by their advocate who has met with them beforehand and discussed exactly what will be said on their behalf. If different ways of including the child/young person's views in the meeting are explored even if they are not going to be present (such as through having a poem/piece of writing read out in the meeting) they can still feel like they have played a central role in the meeting.

As a result of the child/young person becoming actively involved in the decision-making, three intermediate outcomes are more likely to be achieved. This includes them feeling that they have been listened to and involved; feeling that they have some control over the decisions that are about them; and an accessible and clear plan is produced that states allocated tasks and responsibilities to be achieved within an agreed timeframe. Involving the child/young person in the decision-making is an important part of the meeting if the child/young person is to feel positive after the meeting.

1.3 Practice-focused summary: How the programme theory might support social workers and supervisors to deliver shared decision-making meetings

We hope the key findings from the programme theory can be used to guide effective practice by helping social workers, meeting chairs, facilitators and coordinators think about whether what they are doing with a child or young person is consistent with shared decision-making meetings. It is designed to be used to support reflection on and the development of practice, not as a simplistic checklist. For practitioners, we have

provided an overview table which offers a summary of the main ways in which these meetings can be delivered in a way that includes children and young people meaningfully in decision making, listing the main aims they need to achieve to ensure they are delivering the meetings according to the programme theory presented.

How to ensure meetings work to meaningfully engage children/young people in decision making

	What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
Collaboration and engagement	Children and young people feel prepared for the meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child/young person knows the purpose of the meeting Child/young person knows who will be in attendance, what their roles are, and what they will say Child/young person has a clear, hopefully idea of what the meeting hopes to achieve. 	<p>Ensure there is enough time to talk over the processes and what will happen on more than one occasion. Allow time for breaks with fun activities during preparation meetings.</p> <p>Break down any difficult terms ensuring the use of child friendly terms. Check the child/young person's understanding throughout, and at the next visit.</p> <p>Think about giving information in different formats depending on the needs of the person.</p> <p>Use clear and simple language to discuss the purpose of the meeting with the child/young person and why each person is being invited.</p> <p>Create the agenda for the meeting with the child/young person.</p>
	Child/young person has an advocate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child/young person has identified someone who will be at the meeting to support them to express their views Child/person has chosen an advocate/ someone they trust to support them in the meeting. Child/young person feels reassured that they will be able to make their point even if they do not want to talk in the meeting 	<p>Ensure the child/young person has a good relationship with the advocate who may be representing their views on their behalf.</p> <p>Try to match the advocate to the individual child/young people and ensure they have time to get to know each other before the meeting.</p> <p>Give the child/young person plenty of opportunities to write down/draw/record their views in different ways and ask for permission for them to be shared.</p>

How to ensure meetings work to meaningfully engage children/young people in decision making (continued)

	What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
Collaboration and engagement (cont.)	The child/young person has support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child/young person invites people to the meeting who are important to them, and who can offer them practical and emotional support. Child/young person knows everyone who attends the meeting. 	<p>Give the child/young person the opportunity to say who they would like to attend the meeting (e.g. those who they feel knows them best/who they trust).</p> <p>Prepare a seating plan with the child/young person so that they know the names and roles of everyone who will be at the meeting.</p>
Building trust and reducing stigma	The child/young person has choice about key elements of the meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child/young person makes practical decisions around the location and timing of the meeting. Child/young person makes decisions around what will be on the agenda of the meeting. 	<p>Involve the child/young person in the organisation of the meeting e.g. choosing the venue, time of the meeting, refreshments, making/ sending invitations).</p> <p>Consider incorporating food and music at the meeting to create a meeting that can be a celebration of what is going well in the young person's life, not a focus on negatives.</p> <p>If the child/young person has not been given the opportunity to make any decisions around the meeting, think about making choices available to them such as having refreshments available that they choose.</p> <p>If the child/young person has been given options but have not made any decisions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Think about giving easier options based on their own interests first. Ensure the decisions are age appropriate. Work with the child/young person to identify any barriers they may have to voicing their preferences (such as feeling divided loyalties around who they want to invite). Provide options more visually/creatively.
	The child/young person has some control over how they participate in the meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The child/young person feels less anxious about attending the meeting. Child/young person knows what will be said by the advocate on their behalf (if they do not wish to speak). Child/young person has a specified role in the meeting (e.g. an option to chair their own meeting). 	<p>Ensure that the space that the meeting is being held in allows for the child/young person to leave when they want to.</p> <p>With the child/young person, establish ground rules at the start of the meeting in relation to respect, shouting; talking over one another etc. (These could be decided on prior to the meeting with the child/young person and then stated at the start of the meeting).</p> <p>Remind the child/young person that conflict will be managed if it occurs, and how this will be done and that they are able to leave if they feel uncomfortable.</p> <p>Consider helping the child/young person to choose a set role that they can play in the meeting, such as recording notes, writing the plan or chairing some or all the session.</p> <p>Allow the child/young person to see what the advocate has written so that they may be able to point to certain points and know when the advocate will raise them.</p>

How to ensure meetings work to meaningfully engage children/young people in decision making (continued)

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
Building trust and reducing stigma (cont.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child/young person can say what they need/want from a plan Child/young person feels proud of their ability to speak up in the meeting. 	<p>Ensure that the meeting is paced in such a way as to allow the child/young people to keep up with that is going on.</p> <p>Ask the child/young person for their views throughout the meeting as opposed to a given point.</p> <p>Make explicit in the ground rules for the meeting that no one should interrupt, speak over anyone or shout.</p> <p>Consider using creative ways to involve children/young people during the meeting (e.g. sandboxes, drawing, play). This can give them something to focus on whilst speaking. (These methods could also be used prior to the meeting in the preparation process with the social worker and/or the advocate).</p>
Building trust and reducing stigma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child/young person feels prepared and ready to participate in the meeting The child/young person feels positive about attending the meeting Child/young person feels they have some control over the decisions that are about them Child/young person is proud of their involvement 	<p>Emphasise that the meeting is about the young person and is about helping to make sure that they have what they need to be safe.</p> <p>Make sure there is a focus in the meeting on developing a shared vision of what everyone is hoping to achieve, and what life will be like if it is successful. Ensure this is centred on the child/young person's ideas of what they want their life to be like.</p> <p>Reassure the child/young person that all the decisions have not been made before the meeting, and that everyone is open to a dialogue, hearing what they have to say, and taking on board what they want.</p>
Building trust and reducing stigma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child/young person knows what has been decided and how the decision was made Child/young person knows what will happen next after the meeting Child/young person feels able to accept that the decisions that have been made are in their best interest, even if they do not agree with them 	<p>Tailor the language and environment to the individual through the use child-friendly language, considering any additional needs that a child/young person may have and talking directly to the child/young person.</p> <p>An accessible and clear plan is produced that states allocated tasks and responsibilities to be achieved within an agreed timeframe.</p> <p>Everyone has an easy to understand copy of the plan that they can refer to.</p> <p>Consider how the child/young person could be involved in monitoring and feeding back on how the plan is progressing.</p>

How to ensure meetings work to meaningfully engage children/young people in decision making (continued)

What are you trying to achieve?	Signs of success	Overcoming challenges: What to do if the signs of success are not there
<p>Building trust and reducing stigma (cont.)</p> <p>Child/young person not in attendance at the meeting understands the outcome of the meeting</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The same as above. ▪ Child/young person feels informed about the purpose of the meeting and the outcome ▪ Child/young person feels that they have been represented by their advocate 	<p>The same as above.</p> <p>Ensure that the same amount of preparation is afforded to children who are chose not the attend the meeting so that they fully understand what will be discussed and what the purpose of it is.</p> <p>Check that an advocate has met with them beforehand and discussed exactly what will be said on their behalf.</p> <p>Consider asking the child/young person to provide something in a different medium to share their views (such as a poem, picture or video).</p> <p>Offer the child/young person the option to Skype into the meeting if they do not want to be physically present.</p> <p>Consider if the child/young person can have a recording of the meeting to listen to with their social worker/advocate afterwards to that they can hear directly what has been said.</p> <p>Ask the child/young person if it is ok to have a photograph or one of their pictures in the middle of the table at the meeting so that the meeting can remain focused on them while they are not there.</p> <p>Think about asking the chair of the meeting to send a personal letter to the child/young person to detail what was discussed and decided in the meeting, what role their view played, and what will happen next.</p>



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