



Gofal Cymdeithasol **Cymru**
Social Care **Wales**

Relationships between professionals and children living in residential child care

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Find out more about how your relationship as a professional with the children you care for

Why are good professional relationships important for children living in residential care?

Your relationships with children and young people living in residential child care is very important. It can affect how they live their lives and influence their ambitions and dreams.

We know that having a stable safe relationship with one trusted adult (for example a residential child care worker) can make all the difference to [children who have been abused and traumatised](#).

Residential child care workers also tell us one of the best parts of their job is:

The bond and relationships you can build with the young people over time with trust

Feedback from Social Care Wales residential child care workshops, October 2018.

It's important that your relationship with the young people you care for stays within [professional boundaries](#).

Good communication with the children you look after

The [children you look after may have been abused or traumatised](#) and never experienced positive, safe communication with adults. These experiences lead some children to respond in a way you might not expect. This is why clear, consistent and stable communication is important.

Your team will have a model for communication, for example PACE, and you should follow that model.

[Learn more about the 'PACE' approach](#)

You'll need to build a consistent approach to the language you use with the children you're caring for:

- use open questions, for example "What's important to you?", instead of "Is this important?"
- use the 'similar but different' approach, so you're not directly addressing the child if they find it difficult to talk about something
- use age-appropriate language
- remember the importance of non-verbal communication.

Language to avoid:

- don't use professional language when you don't need to, for example terms like 'unit', 'placement', 'search', 'contact'.

You should think carefully about the language you use and make sure your body language is open and receptive. This is very important in communicating well with the children in your care.

Dealing with your own emotions

As you understand the children you care for and learn more about them individually, you'll inevitably feel emotional from time to time. There will be times when it's difficult to be consistent and calm, as you struggle to see the child behind a behaviour that you find challenging.

It's important to remember to take care of yourself, both physically and emotionally in order to do your job well. For example, if you're tired and stressed it will be harder to calmly respond if you're being shouted at or spat at. Your employer should support you to talk about your emotions in a safe space like supervision or team meetings. This will help you to deal with your emotions and carry on being consistent and calm in your communication with children and young people.

You might find calming techniques such as Mindfulness, grounding and building your resilience useful. We've provided links to more information at the bottom of the page.

Communication has many roles but one of the most important is building self-esteem and supporting young people to understand their behaviour and its impact on themselves and others.

Being a role model

To help the children and young people you look after develop positive communication skills, it's important that you show positive communication and behaviour yourself.

We all learn what's acceptable and considered good behaviour from one another. So when a new worker starts in your home, they will look to other

workers to learn how to care for your children. Being stable and secure is equally important for workers as for children: if you are not ok as a worker, then the care you give will not be ok, and a negative culture may develop in the home. This will make caring for your children much harder.

Children also learn by example and if the adults around them are communicating well, they will receive nurturing and positive parenting.

However, children can learn negative behaviour in the same way. For example, some children who've lived in violent households will show violence themselves, as they've learned this is a normal way to behave.

[Children who experience trauma](#) may seem younger emotionally than their age because of the effects of the abuse they've experienced. Undoing these behaviours and learning new ones can take time but this is another reason why consistency and calmness is important when working with children who have experienced abuse or trauma.

Children need to watch, remember, and be motivated to repeat behaviour and you are in a unique position to influence young people in a positive way by 'modelling' or showing positive behaviour and communication. The more that adults around them do this, the more likely the children you look after will gradually show the same behaviour.

[Learn more about the learning through role models in Albert Bandura's 'Social learning theory'](#)

Gaining young people's trust

Children and young people do best when they have a safe adult they can trust. We know this makes them more resilient and more likely to do well in the future. Part of them trusting you is knowing they can tell you anything without you being shocked or judging them.

The children you work with will likely have been let down by adults in the past and may have developed [communication strategies that don't make sense to you](#). For example, you may have always been reliable and kept your promises but they may still expect you to let them down. Because of this they won't rely on you or tell you how they're feeling.

Although this can be hurtful and upsetting, it's important not to take this sort of thing personally. Young person may have learned that adults cannot be trusted, so deep down they feel they need to reject adults and build defences around themselves. They may push you to let them down, as they 'know' you will eventually. In the past, they've learned this keeps them safe.

Remember the well-known example of the iceberg: the behaviour you're seeing is the tip of the iceberg, with a huge amount of experiences, beliefs and values remaining hidden beneath the surface.

This is exactly why being consistent and reliable and showing children ['unconditional positive regard'](#) is so important.

This means that no matter what the young person says or does, you think well of them and like something about them. If you can't find anything to like about a child, they will not feel safe and it will be harder to care for them. You can show you like them by:

- showing affection in a way that suits them (within your [organisational policies](#) and Social Care Wales's Code of Professional Practice for Social Care)

- having a laugh and joke with them
- finding a common interest with them.

[The Social Pedagogy Channel has a video about communication and relationships](#)

You should always be open, honest, consistent and reliable with children, giving them the right level of information. This is their [legal right](#) and very gradually as children realise their life is different now and they're safe, their thoughts, feelings and behaviours will change.

Useful resources

[Our work to support children who are looked after](#)

[Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after](#)

[Advice about self-care from Mind](#)

The Mental Health Foundation has an online [Mindfulness course](#)

[7 simple grounding techniques for calming down quickly](#)

[What is self-efficacy theory in psychology?](#) – advice about how you can use self-efficacy in your relationship with the young people you support

You might also find the following self-help websites useful:

[Tiny Buddha](#)

[Psychology Today](#)

We want your feedback

Help us to improve the Residential child care worker resource by telling us what you think about it in our short [four question survey](#).