

# Research

## Acting in the best interests of homeless children - children and young people's views on where they live

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# Shelter

# Acting the best interests of homeless children – children and young people's views on where they live

## Summary

This report explores children's views about where they live to help shape the Scottish Government guidance on meeting the best interests of children experiencing homelessness. The inclusion of children's perspectives will help ensure the guidance accurately reflects how practitioners, policy makers and managers can most effectively make decisions in the best interests of children.

The lives and situations of children affected by homelessness are complex and diverse. However, this report endeavours to offer an insight into some of the factors that determine children's experiences of where they live. The findings are based on a small scale study with 20 children and young people affected by homelessness, to ascertain their views on what is important to them in relation to where they live.

The findings suggest that the factors determining children's experiences are as much based on children's proximity to good social relationships, school and activities as living in housing of a decent standard and size. A theme running through children's comments was about having to deal with a lack of a permanent home and the related issues of moving around, particularly when it did not lead to an improved situation from children's perspectives. The report goes on to suggest key areas the Guidance needs to consider as a result of this consultation, in order to retain its relevance for children experiencing homelessness.

## Background

Section 32 (8) of the 1987 Housing Act (as amended by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 and Homelessness etc (Scotland) Act 2003) sets out that local authorities must have regard to, and be consistent with, the best interests of any dependent children in a homeless household.

Draft guidance was produced in August 2006. It was informed by responses to the Scottish Executive consultation on unsuitable temporary accommodation for families with children and working in regard to the best interests of children, and a further survey of

local authorities.<sup>1</sup> A reference group of representatives from the children, housing and homelessness sectors also advised on the draft guidance.

The Scottish Government is keen to produce a revised and updated version for publication in March 2009. Work is under way by the Government to ensure the revised guidance is in line with the new Concordat, the latest priorities in the children, housing and homelessness sectors and recent good practice case studies.

A weakness in the current draft guidance is that it has not been informed by children and young people's views about how adults can work in their best interests. This is an important area that needs to be addressed. Children have a right to express their views and to be involved in all matters that affect them, as outlined in the international Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, children, as the best authorities on their own lives will help to highlight the priority areas the Guidance should focus on to protect children from the negative impact of homelessness.

With this in mind Shelter Scotland conducted a small-scale qualitative piece of social research with 20 children, aged 5 to 13 years, who had experience of homelessness. This paper outlines some of the main findings of the research under five themes.

## Methods and sample

A range of participatory research methods were used to elicit the views of the children involved, including drawing, small group discussions and collage work. Further information about the sample is shown in Table 1. The format of the four sessions varied depending on the experiences, interests and abilities of the children involved in each group but the broad questions asked were:

- What do you like / don't like about where you live?
- What things could be made better about where you live?
- What things do adults need to know to make sure places are good enough for children to live in?

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<sup>1</sup> Jardine, L. (2006) *The Best Interests of Children in Homelessness Services: Research to consider a definition and improvements to service delivery*, Commissioned by the Scottish Executive, January, Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland; Scottish Executive (2004) *Consultation on Unsuitable Temporary Accommodation for Families with Children: Order under section 29(3) of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 and on "Best interests of children"*.

<sup>2</sup> See Article 12, UN (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*; Section 16 (1995) *Children (Scotland) Act*.

The informed consent of the children and their parents was gained prior to the session. Pseudonyms, chosen by the children, have been used throughout this report to retain anonymity and confidentiality.

All the children involved were in contact with a child or family support worker from the Shelter Families Projects, and had a range of experiences of homelessness.

The research provides an insight into the views of a small sample of children and is not in any way representative of all children's experiences of homelessness.

Group	Date of session	Girls	Boys	Totals
South Lanarkshire (1 set of siblings)	12 Sep 08	Nicky (10) Emma (10)	Christopher (7)	3
Glasgow (3 sets of siblings)	7 Oct 08	Kelly (12) Jodie (8) Erin (8)	Kyle (8) John (12) Danny (13) Bart (7)	7
Edinburgh (1 set of siblings)	14 Oct 08	Amelia (9) Saskia (9) Whitney (6) Alina (5)		4
Dumfries (0 siblings)	22 Oct 08	Sushi (9) Megan (10) Lulu (10) Tammy (7) Erin (6)	Liam (6)	6
		14 girls	6 boys	20

Table 1: The sample

## Children's views on where they live

*I don't want a house, I want a home!! (Saskia)*

What children consider to be important in making somewhere a place they want to live is diverse and as summed up by Saskia's comment above it is wider than providing the physical bricks and mortar of a house.

Five themes ran through the consultation providing an insight into children's experiences of homelessness in terms of where they live. In summary, children said it was important for them to:

1. Live in a friendly, safe neighbourhood near to friends, school and activities
2. Be near family and peer support networks, and friendly neighbours
3. Live in housing of a decent size and standard for them and their families
4. Have a permanent home and to have to move less
5. Be listened to by adults.

### 1. Quality of children's local area

Children valued living in areas where they have things to do – both organised activities such as Brownies/Guides, dance classes and sports, as well as spaces such as parks and gardens for more informal play opportunities:

*I like that a park and a community centre is near us, our backs [garden] are good and large, and that a Brownie club is near us (Jodie, talking about figure 1)*

*I like that the Guides is just round the corner and that I'm near my school (Kelly)*

*It is important children have stuff to do like netball, drama, football (South Lanarkshire group)*

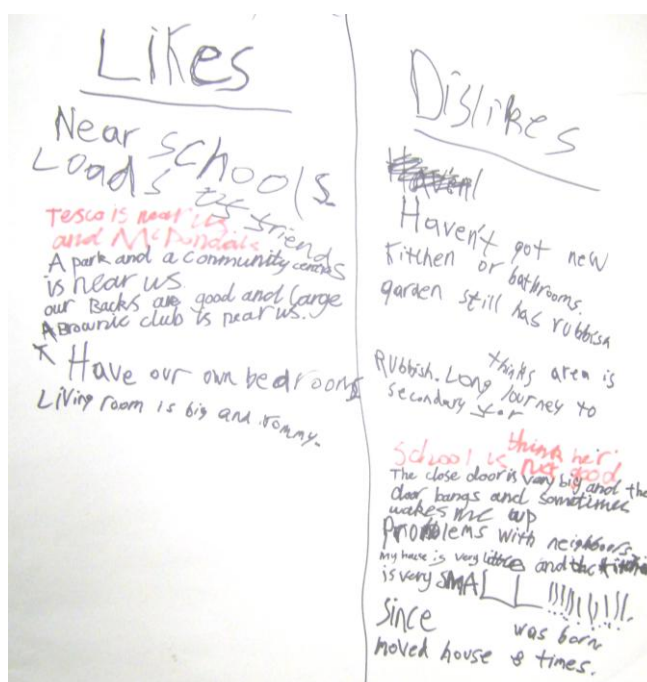


Figure 1: John and Jodie's view on where they live

Children noted how their leisure opportunities are limited to the activities and amenities offered to them in their immediate area. This can mean they lack things to do and want better local facilities:

*It's quite boring where we play. They should build a wee park and a community centre, and do something in the big grass bit near the house (Amelia)*

*They should do more stuff near where we live like hop scotch, games, make a hall for dancing, or a hall for basketball (Amelia).*

In terms of school, children valued both their proximity to school and the friendships they had with peers. John talked about his dislike for a 30 minute walk to and from his secondary school everyday. Others explained it was important for them to be at a school where they have friends and are not bullied (see section 2).

Living in a friendly, safe neighbourhood was also raised as a priority:

*Our area is rubbish – it's O.K but has not got really friendly people (Jodie)*

*Children need to feel safe and happy. Make sure they are in a safe area. (Glasgow group, see figure 2).*

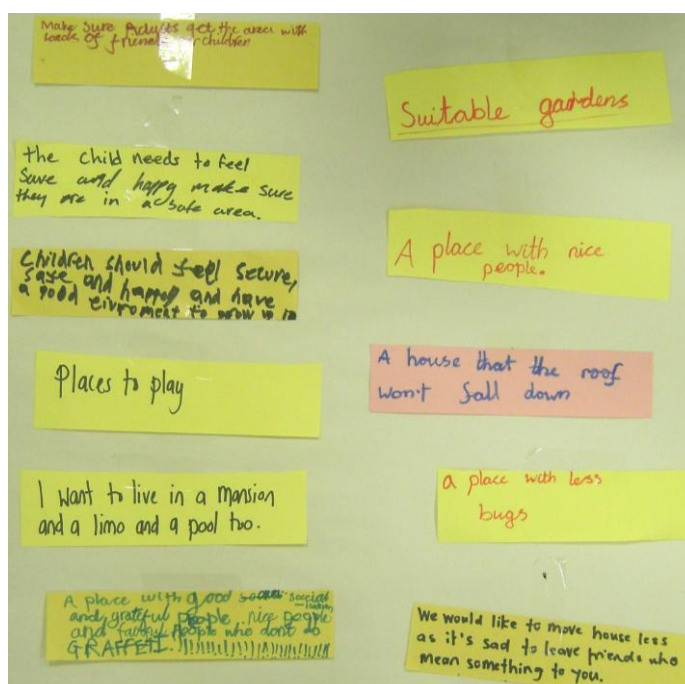


Figure 2: Glasgow group's messages for adults

These comments highlight the importance for the children consulted to live in safe neighbourhoods near to child friendly spaces and amenities with opportunities to attend regular youth work activities and school where they have friends.

## 2. Children's social and support networks

Friendships with peers, relations and neighbours were a valuable source of support for the children, and clearly influenced their experiences. Bullying and having no friends at school or nearby was commonly cited as a reason why children did not like where they lived:

*I don't like where I live because I've no friends in the block cos I'm the only child in the block (Lulu)*

*There is nothing I like about where I live .....I have no friends at school and I miss my friends (Sushi)*

*Things could be made better if there were not so nasty people at school and I didn't get picked on (Tammy).*

As you would then expect friendship was cited as an important way to improve their own and other children's lives:

*Things could be made better if I had friends and friendly neighbours (Megan)*

*It's important that children have a lot of friends where they are about to be living. I don't have any friends. Its important for children...to have decent friends who are going out to play all the time (Nicky)*

*Make sure adults get the areas with loads of friends for children (Glasgow group).*

Children also valued the support provided by adults, either by family, parent's friends or neighbours:

*It's important to be near family cos they can help us (Lucy)*

*Shelter listens to us and my mum and my mum's friends but the council don't (Sushi)*

*When there was no room for Lulu [a girl in the same session] to stay at her dad's she came to stay with us but she still visited her dad cos he lived next door (Sushi).*

These comments highlight the importance of children being able to develop and sustain their relationships with peers both in and out of school. It raises concerns about the negative impact moving away from an area can have when children have developed

supportive networks, and the difficulties of settling into new schools. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance for children of maintaining old friendships and networks as well as having opportunities to build new ones if they move areas.

### 3. Decent housing

The third area focused on by children was the physical standards of their accommodation, for example houses being in decent repair, having enough space, especially to play, not being noisy and being clean.

Children commonly spoke about accommodation being too small for the whole family:

*Things we dislike about where we live [included]: haven't got new kitchens or bathrooms, my house is very little and the kitchen is very SMALLLLLL!!!! (John and Jodie)*

*There is nothing I like about where I live....I share the flat with my brother, and my mother and her boyfriend have to sleep in the living room (Sushi).*

Sushi goes on to say: *I hate having to share my room*, highlighting the value children put on having their own private spaces, like a bedroom or spaces for playing such as a garden:

*I don't like where I live because it is too small and I don't have my own bedroom (Kelly)*

*We have no decent garden to play in - I've got a tiny garden about as big as this table (Sushi)*

*We like our new place. We've got our own room and now we have space to play and have our toys [prior to this there were 6 people sharing 2 bedrooms] (Whitney).*

Other factors children noted as having a negative impact on their lives was living somewhere in disrepair; noise disturbance, especially at night; infestations of rodents and fleas; and the general cleanliness of shared areas. This is evident from the following comments made by children in the consultation:

*Disrepair: The rooms are very dirty cos when its raining water comes through my window even when its closed (Sushi)*

*Noise disturbance / bad smells: Bad things about where I live [included]: having drunks bang on our door at night, people coming in and making a racket, bad smells at the back door, people ringing the buzzer to get in (Lulu, talking about figure 3)*



Noise disturbance: *The close door is very big and door bangs and sometimes wakes me up (John)*

Rodents: *When we first arrived there were dead rats in the garden, and a dead bird and a dead hamster. There are still rats in the house (Tammy)*

Fleas: *When we moved into a new house we had an infestation of fleas. We were all getting bitten with them...and we weren't feeling very well after being bitten (Tammy).*

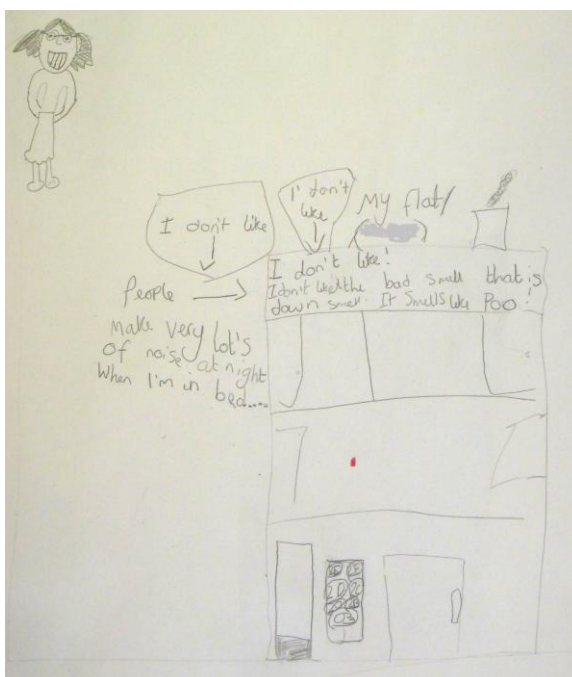


Figure 3: Lulu's views about where she lives

The importance children place on living in decent housing is highlighted by Saskia, who had recently moved from a basement flat into a '*flat that looks like a house*'; when asked what she liked about where she lived Saskia drew the view out of the bedroom window in her new house (see figure 4)

*The view out of my window. View, space, me, fun, sun, nature, sunlight, sky, garden, hills, sunshine. - Now I have my own room with a view...I used to look onto a brick wall (Saskia)*

Saskia went on to say: *School is really important to me. I really like it and it's a really good school. I don't want to have to leave.*

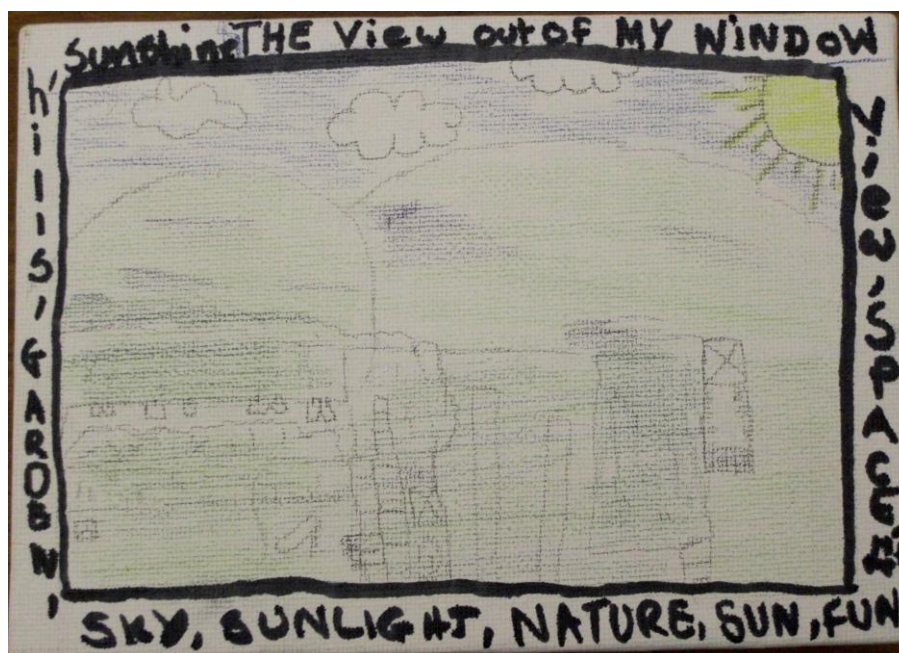


Figure 4: Saskia's picture

Saskia is clearly happy about moving into a higher standard of temporary accommodation but it has meant that she is no longer living near to her school and could potentially mean she has to move schools. This situation highlights the challenges in making decisions about what is in children's best interests when there is a lack of decent housing in the appropriate areas.

These views illustrate the importance children place on living in decent accommodation, and that more needs to be done to raise the quality of housing in children's local areas so living in an acceptable standard of housing is not to the detriment of other aspects of their lives such as education or friendships.

#### **4. A lack of permanence for homeless children**

Throughout the sessions children frequently referred to the difficulties of not having a permanent home. On the subject of moving children said:

*I don't like that I'll have to move home again (Sushi)*

*If we had to move I would cry. I've moved 5 times. (Glasgow group)*

*I dislike that since I was born I have moved 8 times (John).*

In particular children noted the difficulties in leaving friends behind, which links in with the importance children placed on support provided by peers (see section 2):

*We would like to move house less as it's sad to leave friends behind who mean something to you.*

For Amelia moving resulted in the loss of friendships with peers and supportive neighbours and an end to her dance classes, all of which provided valuable support when her family life was chaotic:

*Next door to my old flat we had nice next door neighbours, she was really nice. I used to watch tv at hers and feel her baby kick. I've not seen her for ages because we moved after the baby was born.... My friend at school was like my sister, she was my best friend for 3 years but I've not seen her for ages because I don't have her number.... I used to come here [to the community centre where we were] for dance classes when I lived here. After we moved I stopped doing dance (Amelia).*

Other issues raised related to moving house included bullying at school, sleeping difficulties: *I get bad dreams about moving and getting lost (Tammy)*, getting rid of toys because of moving to a smaller place and having to give pets away.

On the other hand, children mentioned that moving could be a positive thing if it meant they were moving to a permanent home or somewhere that was better suited to them for example a bigger place or somewhere with a garden.

These comments illustrate the importance children put on having a stable place to live and the possible disruption caused to children's lives by moving in general and leaving the local area.

## **5. Listening to children**

From children's comments it is also evident they want to be listened to by adults, have clarity and honesty about what is happening and be involved in decisions that will affect their lives:

*Adults need to talk to children about what's happening and listen to them more. They need to speak to children about where they're moving and when because children sometimes can't understand it otherwise (Jodie)*

*We listen to grown ups so grown ups should listen to kids (Edinburgh group, see figure 5).*

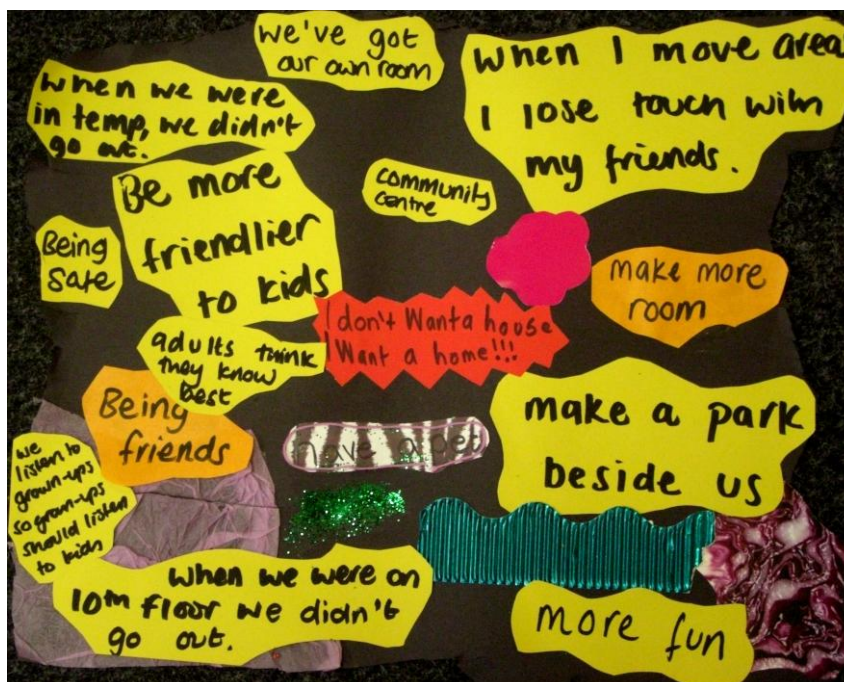


Figure 5: Edinburgh group's messages for adults

Some children felt listened to, but not by all adults who needed to listen, for example not by 'the council' who are probably the ones most likely to be able to influence children's experiences of homelessness:

*Shelter listens to us and my mum and my mum's friends but the council don't (Sushi)*

*My mum listens to me but other adults don't (Amelia).*

There was also a clear sense that adults need to talk more with children in order to better understand their lives, concerns and interests:

*Adults sometimes don't know what its like. It's boring where I live, there is nothing to do and children don't get outside cos there are bad people outside (Amelia).*

It is vital that if practitioners, policy makers and managers are to act in the best interests of children they need to take seriously their responsibility to consider the views of children and incorporate these into their decision making processes in a meaningful way.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See [www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk) for further resources and information on effectively involving children and young people in issues that affect their lives; Save the Children UK (2005) *Practice Standards in Children's Participation*, International Save the Children Alliance

## Conclusion

The purpose of this report is to try and ensure that children, and their interests, remain central to the purpose of the Guidance. This report, although it cannot claim to be representative of all children who are affected by homelessness, offers an insight into children's experiences of where they live. The findings highlight the factors which play a role in determining the quality of children's lives. In summary, to work in children's interests, it is necessary to recognise the value children place on:

- living in a friendly, safe neighbourhood near to friends, school, places to play and appropriate activities
- the supportive role of friends and family who live locally; having opportunities to sustain these and develop new friendships if they move out of the local area
- living in housing of a decent size and standard
- having a permanent home, and for necessary moves to be more considerate of children's concerns and views
- adults listening and engaging with children meaningfully so they have a better understanding of children's situations, and are able to include children in decision making that affects their lives.

The findings invariably have implications for how the Guidance will keep in line with what is important to children themselves. Some of the areas which we suggest are particularly necessary for the Guidance to consider as a result of this consultation are:

- Children need to have access to opportunities and spaces to play. Children value having enough space within their accommodation to play and keep their belongings, and a garden they can use. It is also about children wanting to live in areas where they both feel safe, have things to do of interest to them and have spaces in their immediate vicinity where they can play and spend time.
- The quality of children's immediate area around their accommodation is likely to have a stronger influence on the quality of their lives than for adults because of their limited mobility in comparison to adults'. It is therefore even more important to ensure children's local surroundings meet their needs, as well as acknowledging the impact and difficulties children may face when they are forced to leave an area. For example it is likely to be harder for children to retain friendships with peers when they move away or continue with interests that are no longer available in their local area.
- The supportive role of friends and family who live locally, and having opportunities to sustain these and develop new friendships if they move out of the local area. It is clear that the quality of children's relationships with peers and adults is an important

aspect of their lives which can be seriously affected by the lack of permanence offered by temporary accommodation.

- The need to minimise the number of moves children have to make, particularly when it is not in line with children's interests or concerns. When moving is unavoidable children should be involved in this process and consideration needs to be made as to how this may affect the children involved, for example the difficulties in settling into a new school, experiencing bullying, having bad dreams, toys getting broken and pets being given away.
- A further consideration is making sure homelessness does not necessarily affect children's education, for example making sure children can still easily get to and from school and are able to stay at a school where they are happy. The quality of children's friendships with others at school is clearly important in influencing their experience at school and quality of life.
- Children's relative powerlessness in society means that procedures must be in place to ensure they are meaningfully involved in decision making following a homelessness application. This not only helps to ensure decisions more accurately reflect children's concerns and needs, but it is their right and children value being listened to by adults involved in their lives.
- The quality of children's experiences are influenced by a wide range of factors meaning it is vital to promote dialogue between services who work with children, such as education, health, social work, housing and homelessness when considering how to act in individual children's interests, as well as when developing higher level policy and strategy in relation to children's interests.
- Children, even within the same family need to be respected as individuals. Five sets of siblings were involved in the consultations and it is worth noting that although they sometimes raised similar issues, they also raised different ones thus highlighting the importance of seeing children as individuals with different experiences and concerns depending on their own circumstances such as age, gender, interests and abilities and family status.

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