



Meaningful participation of children and young people in decisions about their care

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Webinar Objectives

- To consider what we mean by children's participation
- To feedback findings from research with children and professionals
- To discuss barriers and enablers to ensuring children and young people have an opportunity to participate meaningfully
- To consider how we can improve practice in relation to children's participation

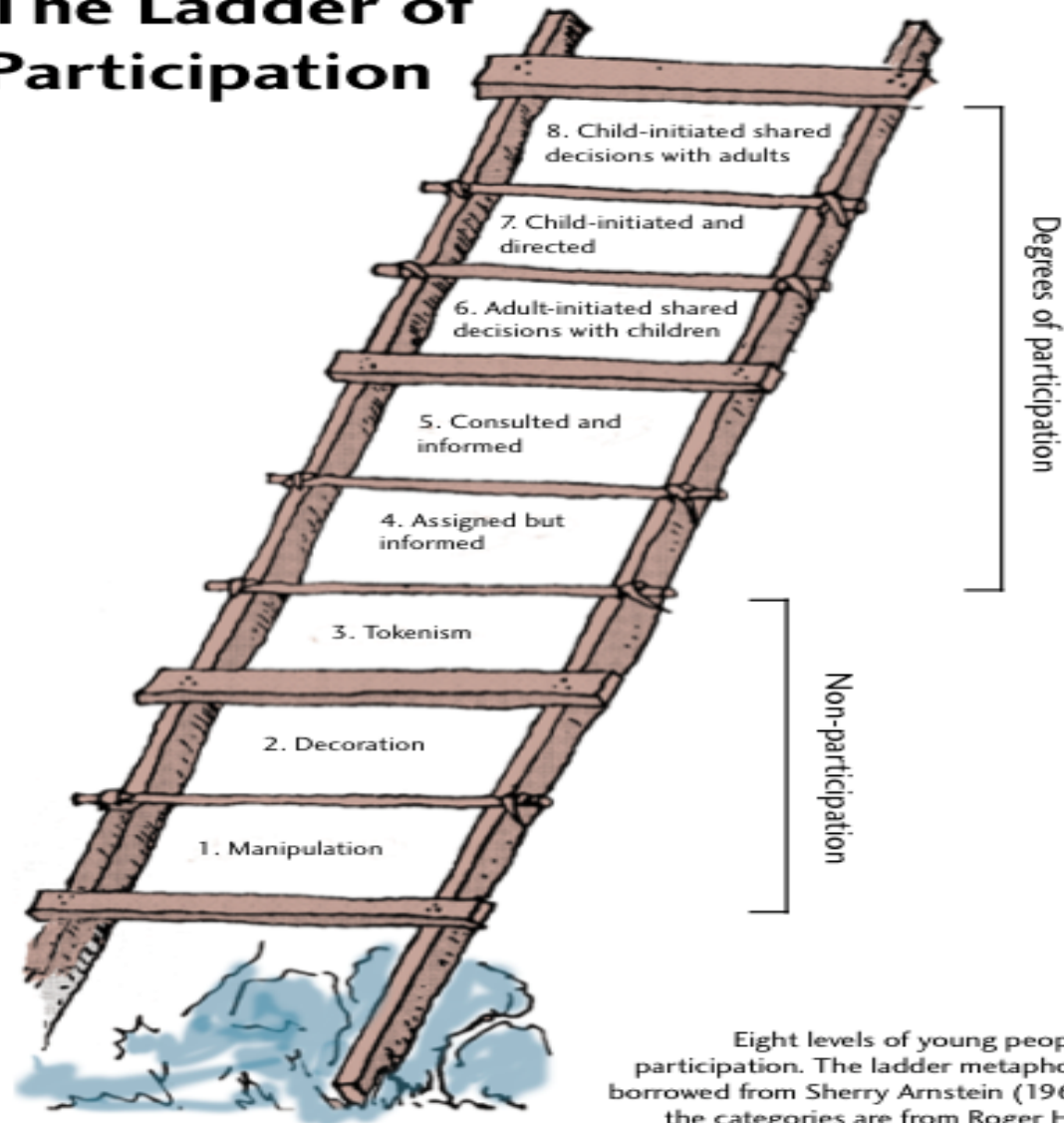
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Theoretical and practical questions

- What do we mean by participation?
- What is the aim and purpose of participation?
- What counts as effective participation?
- How do we evaluate participation?
- Who participates, in whose space, under whose rules?

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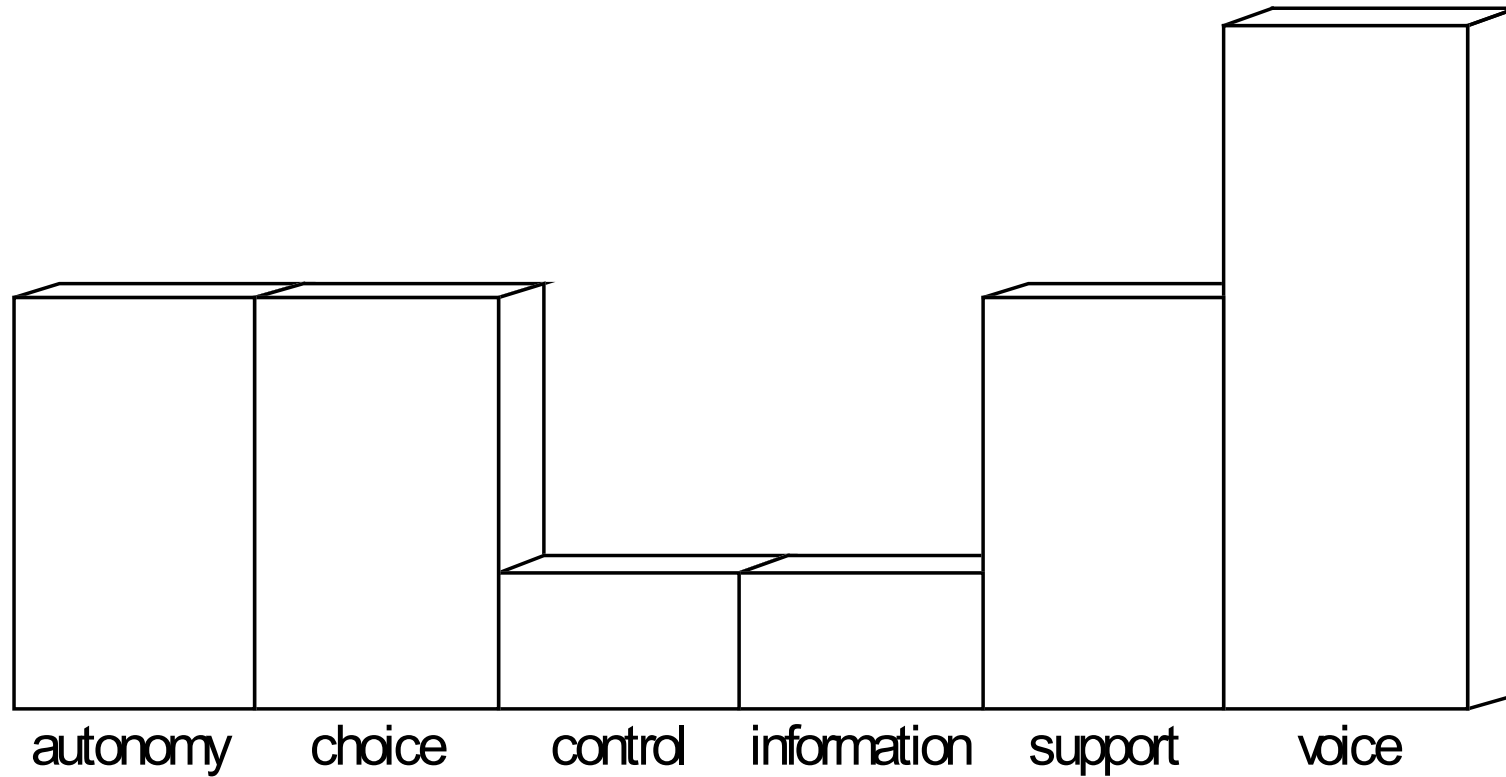
The Ladder of Participation



Eight levels of young people's participation. The ladder metaphor is borrowed from Sherry Arnstein (1969); the categories are from Roger Hart.

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The 'climbing wall' of participation (Thomas 2002)



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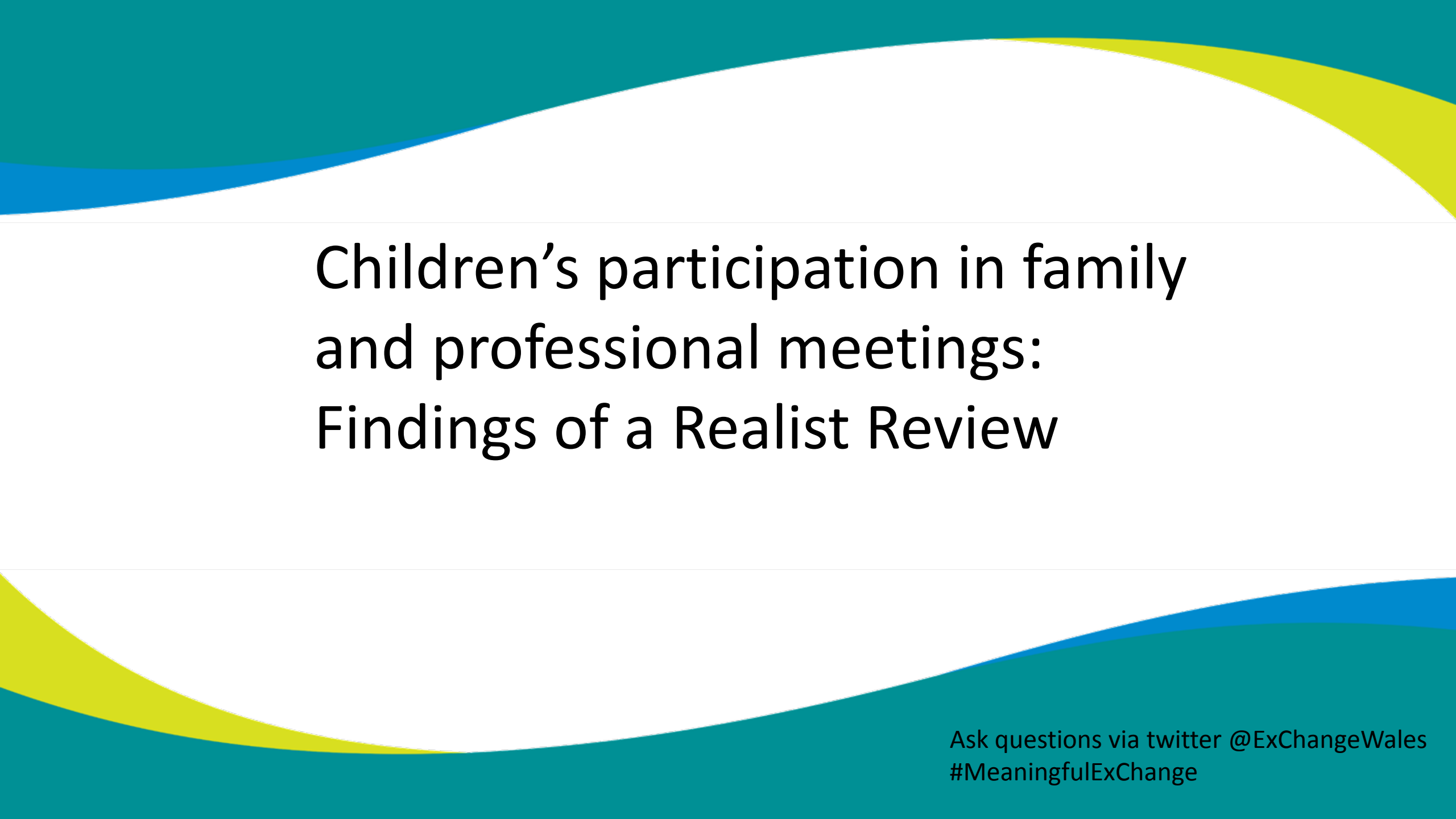
Children's Participation: why is it important?

- Participation can be seen as a protective factor for vulnerable children and young people leading to increased levels of confidence, self-efficacy and self-worth (Dickens et al. 2015).
- Participation by children matters because it an acknowledgment of their civil rights and because without listening to children and understanding how they experience their world, how can we begin to determine what will ensure their protection and enable them to grow into healthy adults? (Schofield and Thoburn 1996, p.1).

Children's Participation - why is it important?

- Maltreated children who do not feel involved may be left with feelings of powerlessness (Bell 2002).
- It will improve the practice and decision making of the agency (Dickens et al 2015).

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Children's participation in family and professional meetings: Findings of a Realist Review

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Overview

- Method
- Preparing for the meeting
- During the meeting
- Incorporating non attending
- After the meeting
- The practitioner's role

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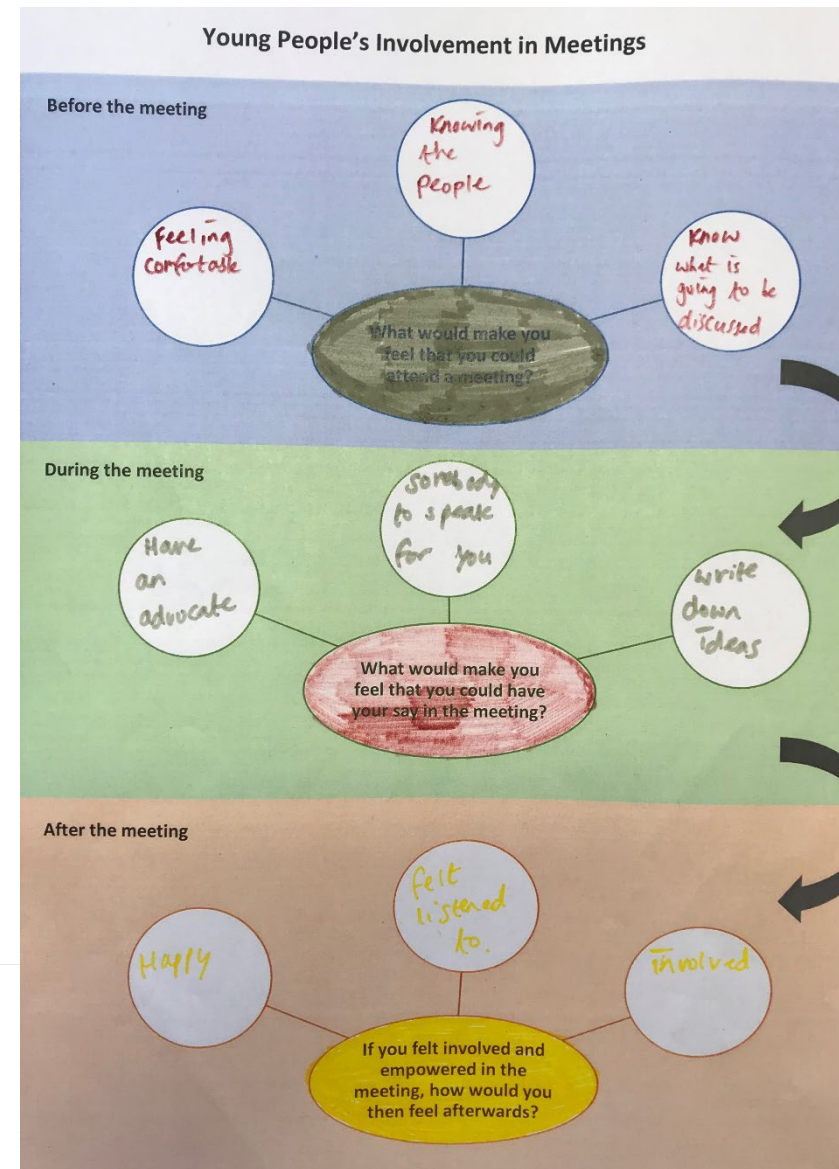
Method

- The Realist Approach
- Theory Building
 - Literature
 - Consultation

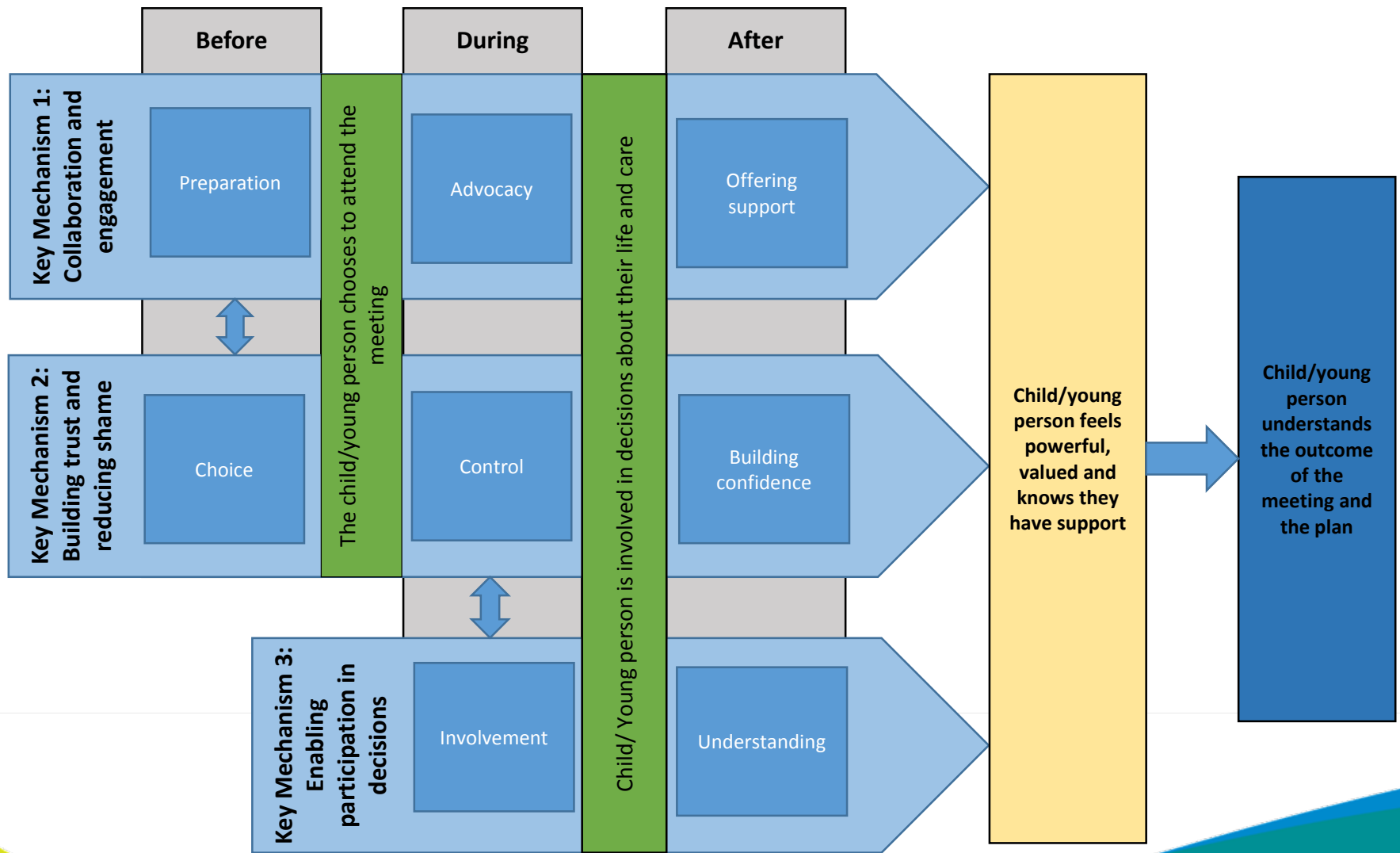
What Works Centre for Children's Social Care:

Signs of Safety review: https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research_reports/signs-of-safety-findings-from-a-mixed-methods-systematic-review-focussed-on

Scoping review on Reducing the need for children to enter care: https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research_reports/reducing-the-need-for-children-to-enter-care

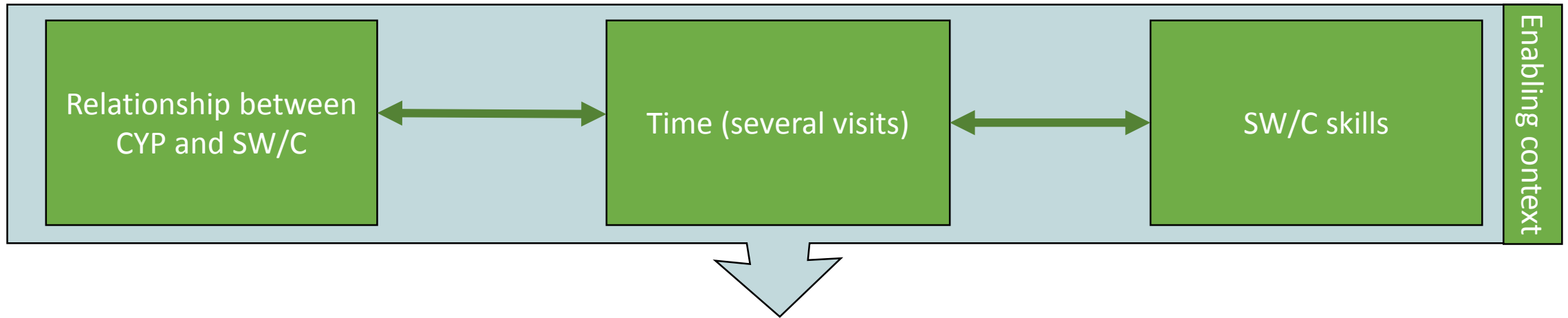


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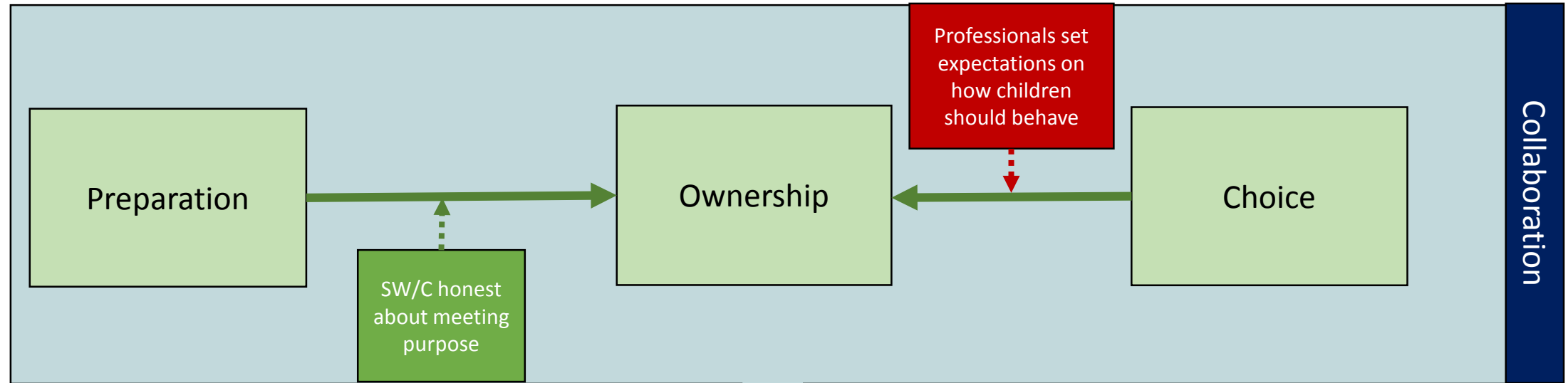
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Before the meeting: Pre conditions



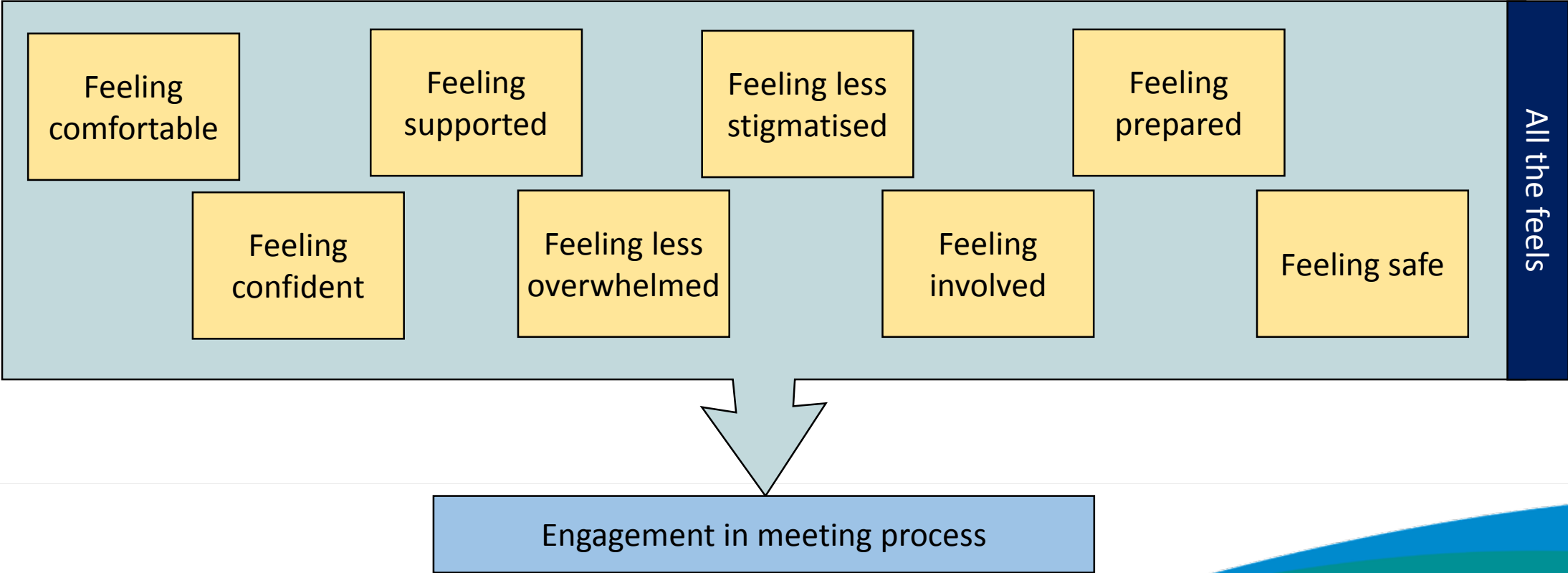
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Before the meeting: Preparation



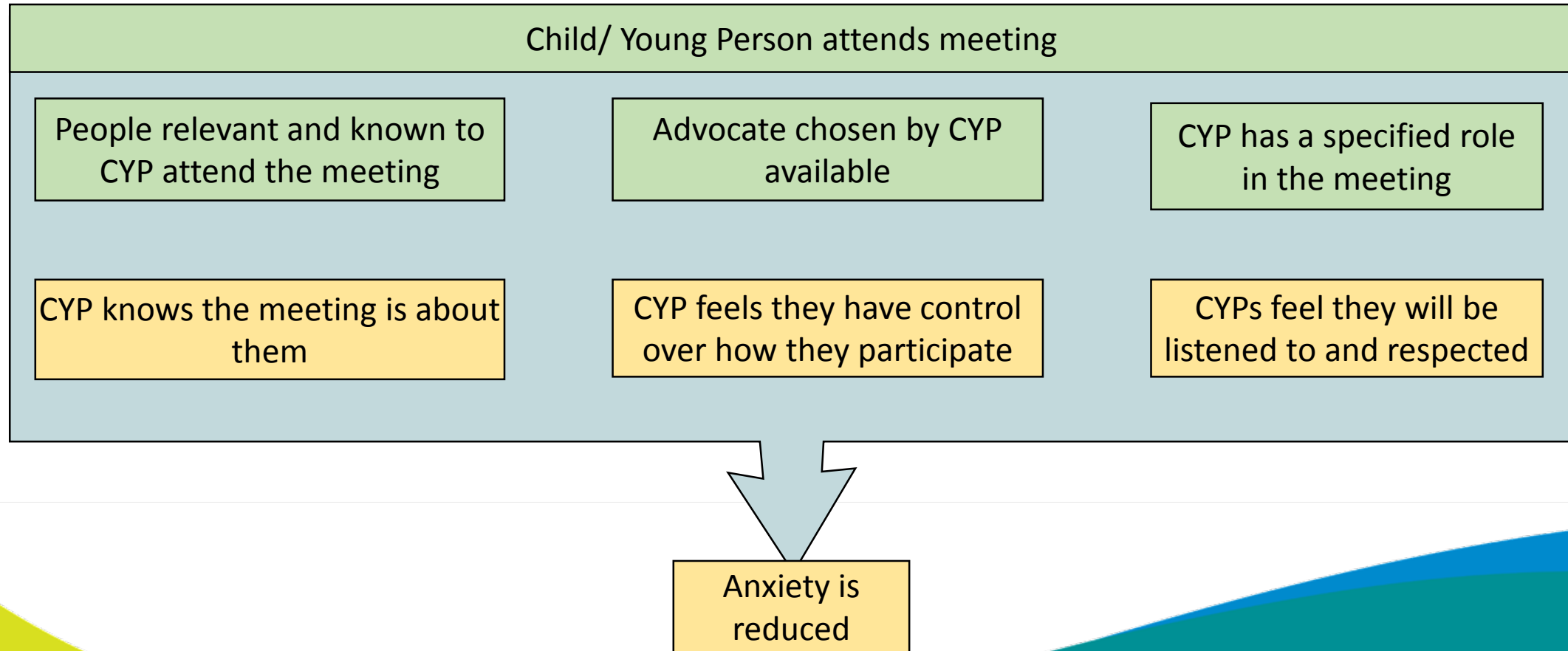
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Before the meeting: Feeling able to engage



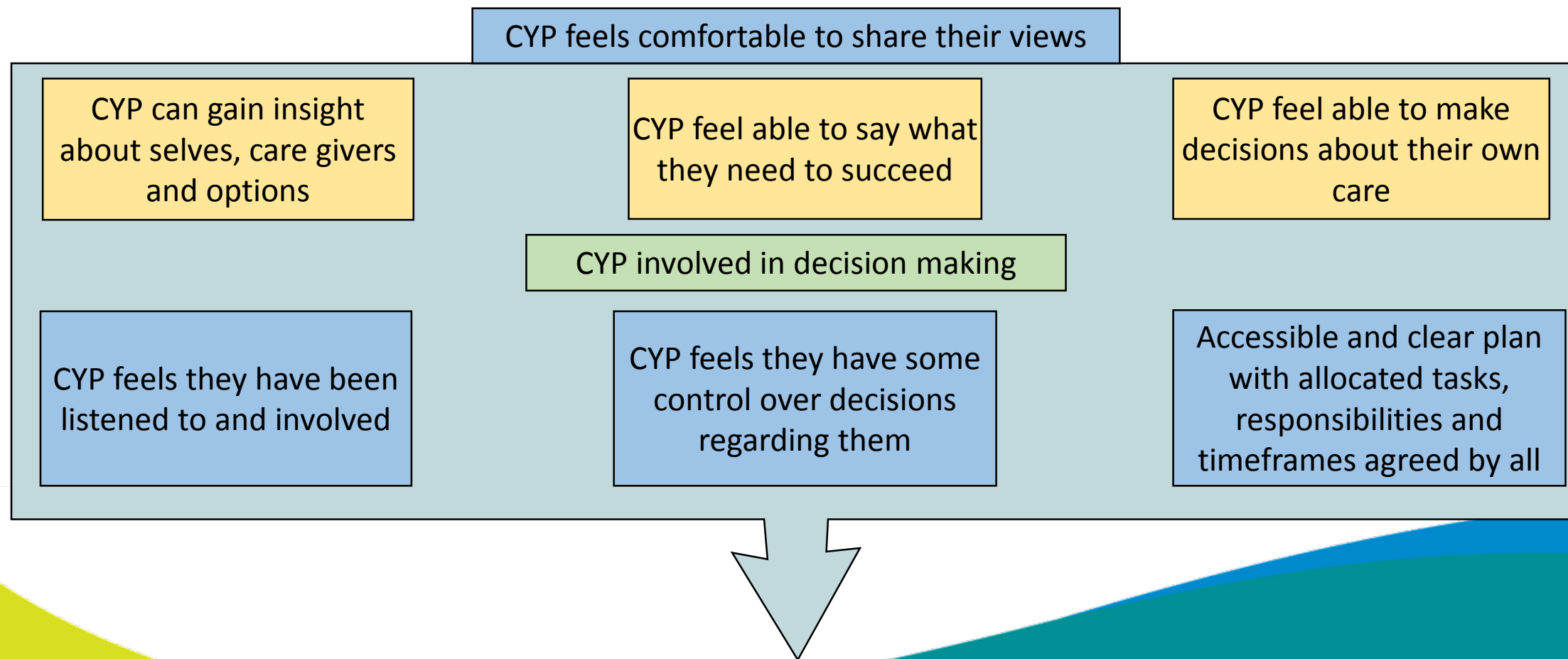
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In the meeting: Setting the tone



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In the meeting: Involvement in decisions



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In the meeting: Barriers to involvement

Adults interrupt

Adults speak over the young person, do not give them enough space to talk, or shout.

Family conflict

Families have been estranged, or disagree on issues, or professional conflict.

Difficult conversations

Families members say in front of the child they cannot/will not care for them.

Police are present

Families feel nervous/wary about speaking in front of police.

Family members do not turn up

CYP expects family members to turn up for the meeting but they do not show.

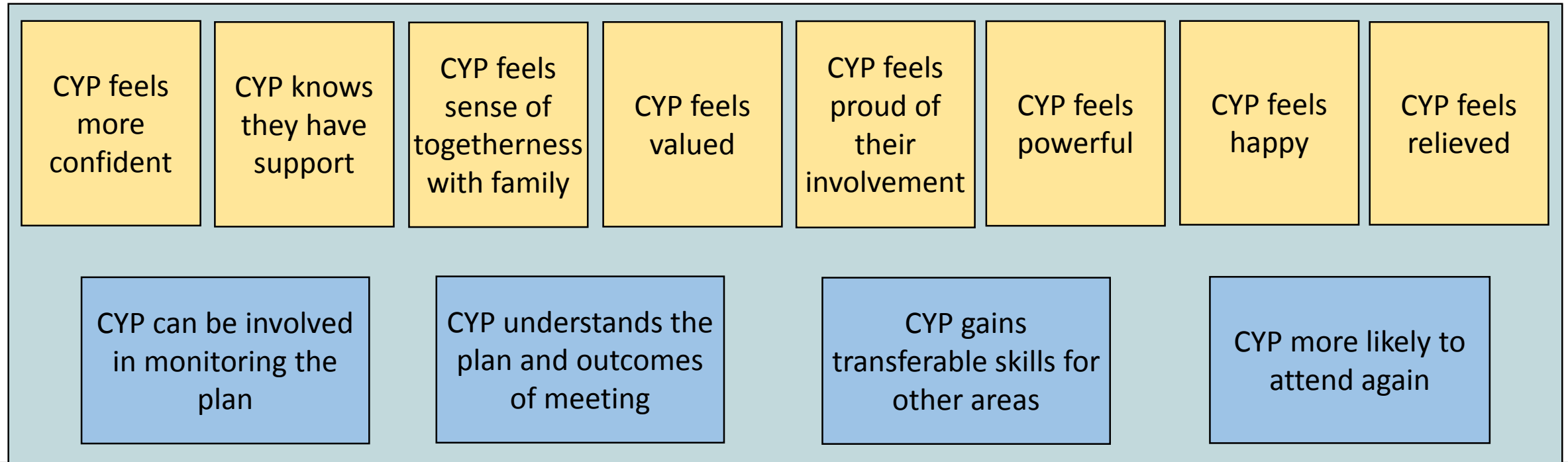
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In the meeting: Enablers to involvement

Language/ environment	Language and environment tailored to the individual so that they can understand and participate.
CYP asked for views	CYP asked for their views throughout the meeting, not just at a set point.
CYP given space/time	CYP given enough space/time to speak in the meeting and be involved at their own pace.
Advocate presence	An advocate can support the child/young person to say what they need to, or speak on their behalf when there as difficult things to say.

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After the meeting: Positive outcomes



Incorporating non attending CYP

Preparation	Children and young people given the same amount of preparation in terms of understanding the purpose of the meeting
Use of advocate	Advocate can meet with CYP before the meeting and write down what they want said in their own words
Flexibility of medium	Children and young people can be given the opportunity to express their views in a creative medium such as a poem read out.
Use of technology	Technology, such as Skype or Facetime can be used to allow children and young people to express participate from a distance.
Feedback	The meeting can be recorded so that children and young people can hear/see exactly what was said.



Research Presented

Children and Young People and Foster carers' views of participation and children in care reviews

- Qualitative study - semi structured interviews, pictures
- 25 Looked After Children and Young People
- 16 foster carers



Aim

1. To explore how far children and young people understand the process and purpose of Child in care reviews and how able they are to **meaningfully** participate in these meetings.



Key findings

1. Understanding of the process
2. Children's engagement in the process
3. Barriers and enablers to participation



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Understanding of the meeting

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Purpose

- Children and young people often misunderstood the purpose of reviews
‘I think they are about school’
- Those who did have clearer understanding of IRO role and review process felt more positively about them and found them useful
‘if you didn’t have them then you wouldn’t know who to see or what to do and nothing would be changed’

Purpose

- None of the CYP interviewed identified reviewing their care plan
- CYP divided about usefulness of review meetings

'I've been with X and Y for 8 years it's not like I need all of that'

'if you didn't have them then you wouldn't know who to see or what to do and nothing would be changed'

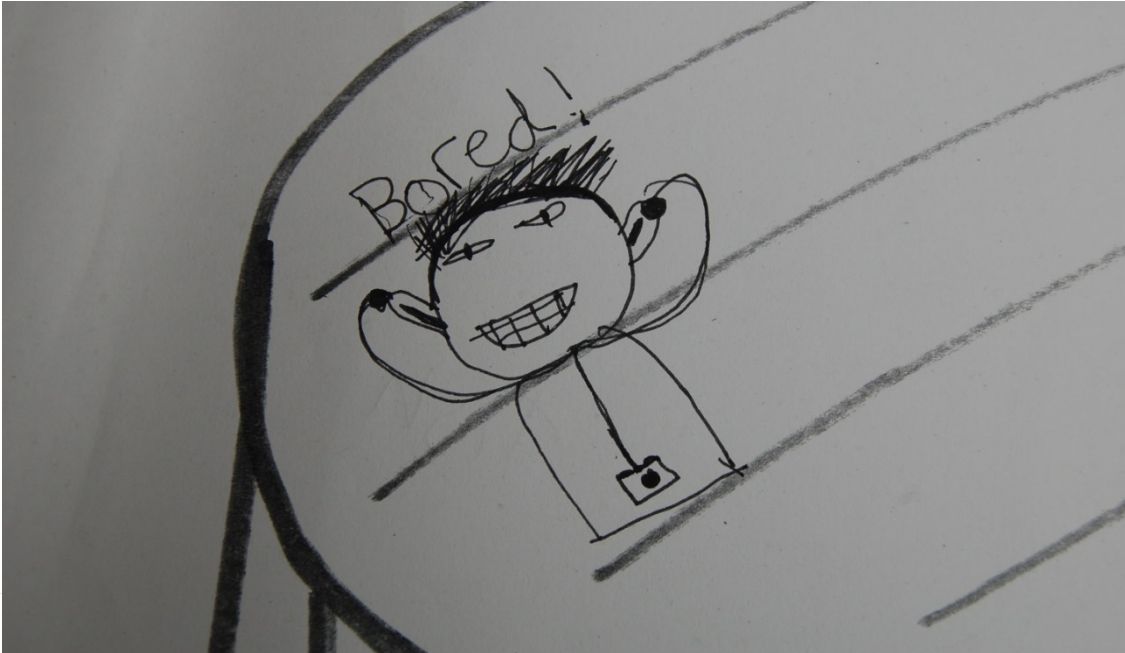
'sometimes there isn't really anything that you want to put across'

Engagement

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Feelings

Younger Children (8-12 years)



Adolescents (12-17 years)

'I don't like attending those meetings, it's awkward they ask you the same questions over and over'

'They are hard work.' 'It's weird. I just want them out the way'

Choice - Young people's views

CYP not involved in agenda setting, attendees, venue

'The IRO comes with their own agenda, its their agenda really'

'At my last review random people started turning up and I was like – who are you? I didn't know who they were'

'I would have it on a rollercoaster! I would love to see him (IRO) on a rollercoaster!'

Barriers and Enablers

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Perception of meeting

Children and young people aware of bureaucracy:

'They are ok because....well they happen. Everything is boring but they have to be done'

'It's just tell us about school, how's school? Tell me about your health? Are you happy...'

IRO Role



- 24% of CYP did not know who their IRO was or understood the role
- Drift, particularly therapeutic actions
- Lack of perceived challenge social worker visit regularity.
- Foster carer admiration of IRO

'I love it when they sit down with X, they really do their job well'



BUT...

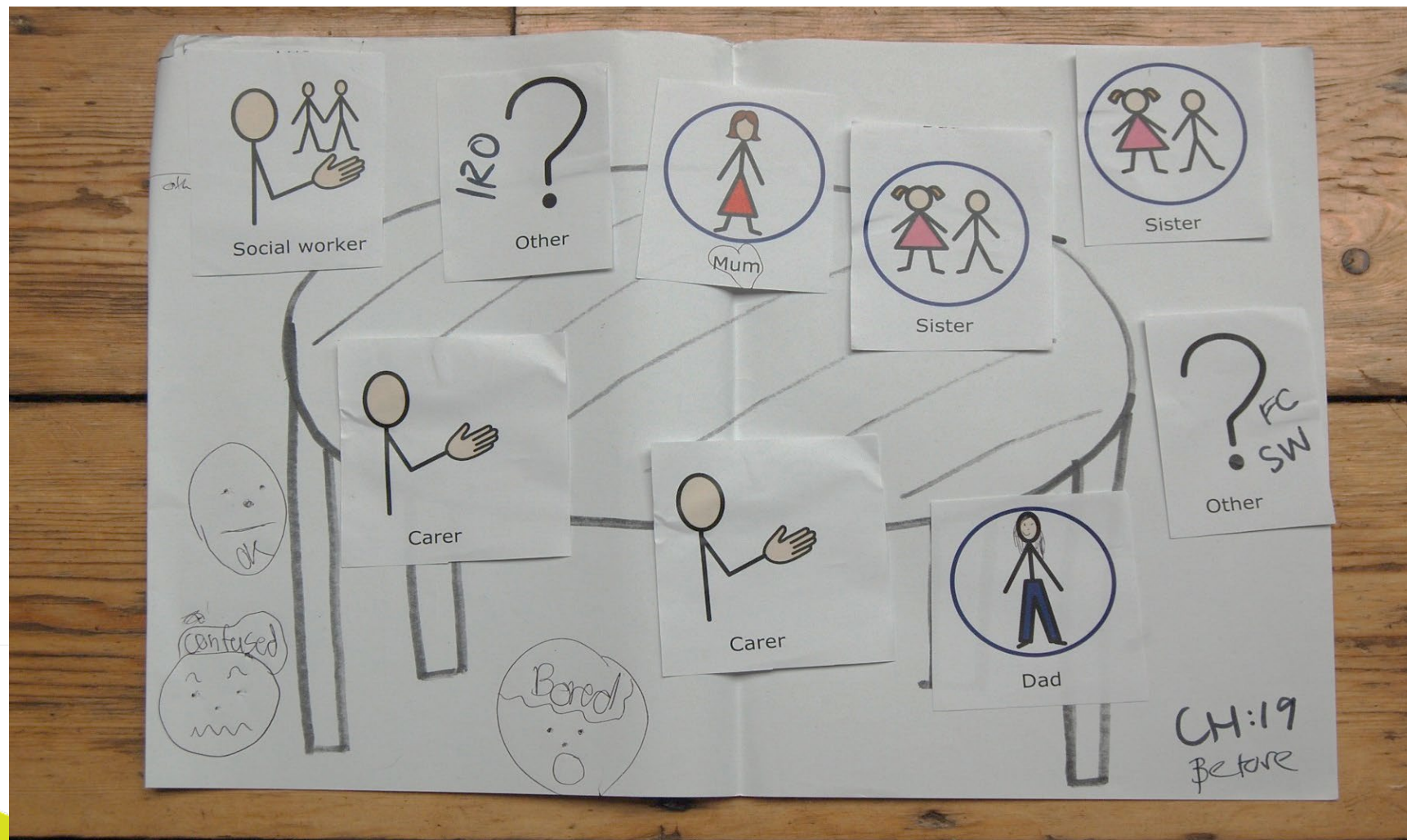


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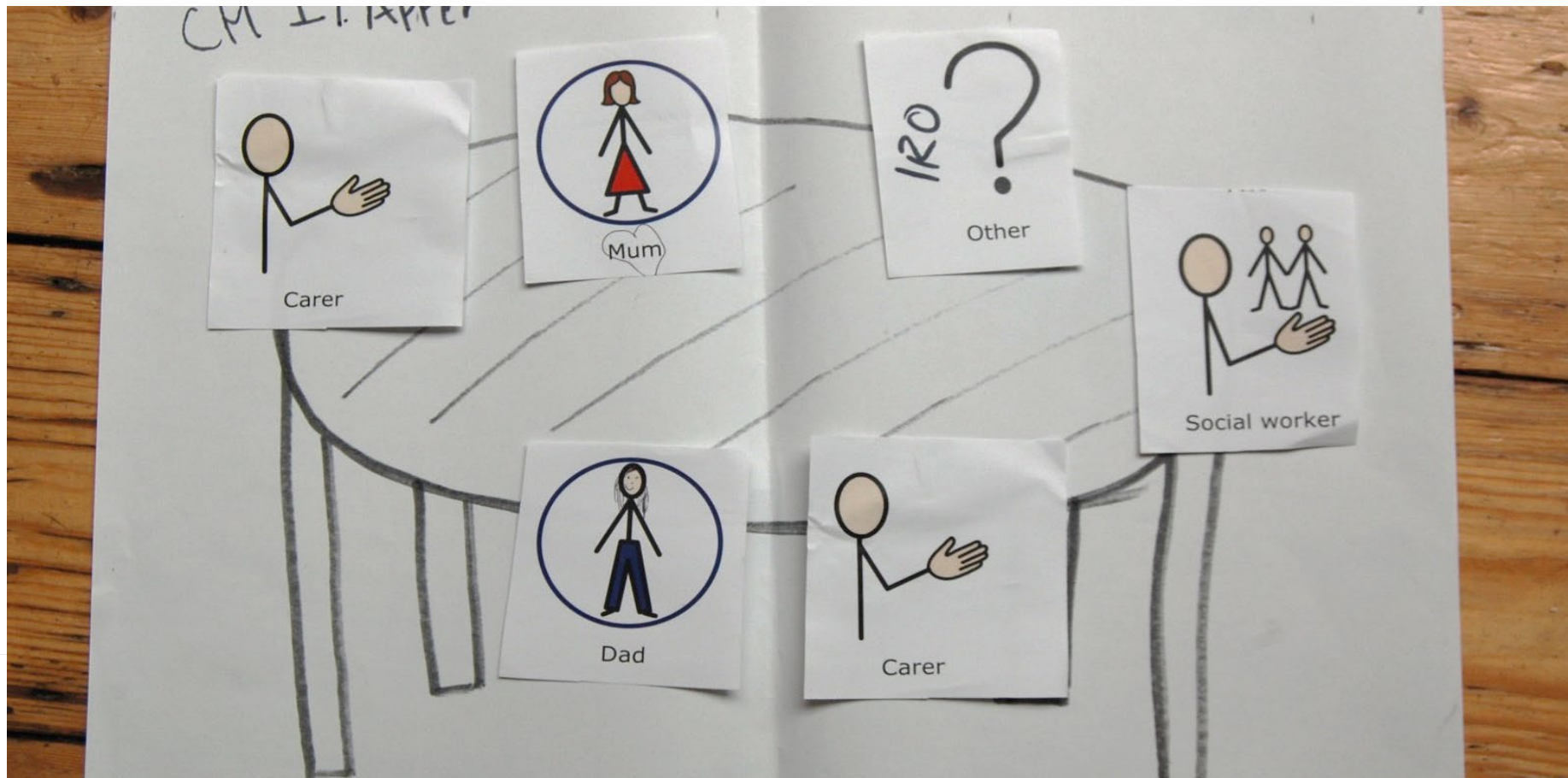
Choice: attendees

- **Teachers** negative and change focus of reviews - YP did not want their teachers or other professionals there
- CYP unhappy at foster carers social worker attendance -thought they were FC's 'friends'

Before



After



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Conclusions

Practice Links

Child focussed or professional centred?

Does the young people understand:

- *Who we all are*
- *What we are doing (right now and in the long term)*
- *Why we are doing it?*

Professional commitment to participation makes a huge difference

Preparation and **choice** essential

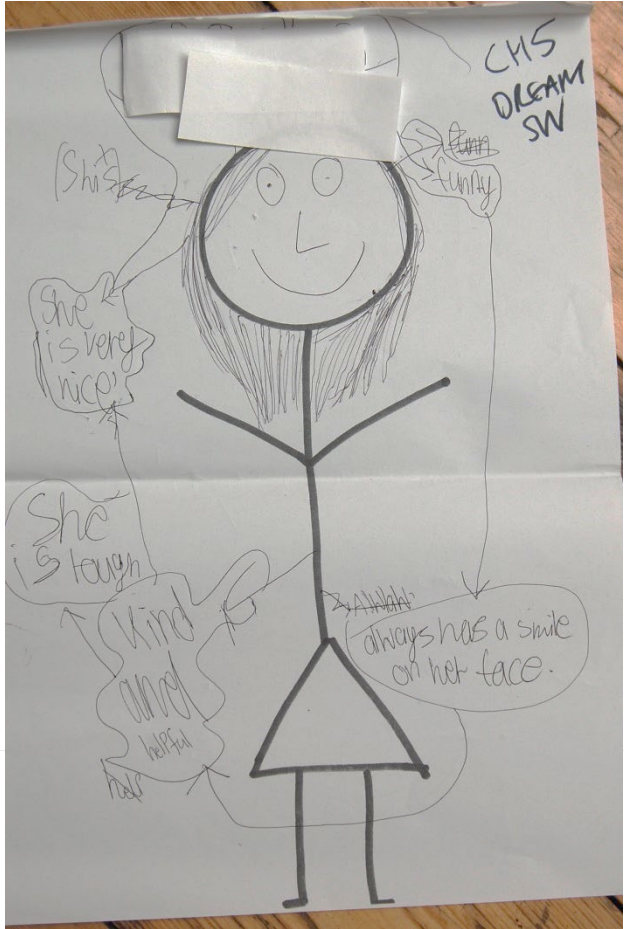
Creative practice essential

A good professional is remembered

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Dream Social Workers



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Interviews in a different LA with 10 YP, 11 social workers, 8 IROs and 7 senior managers

Professionals/YP views of Child Participation

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Barrier 1: High Turnover of Staff and inexperienced staff

All young people raised the high number of social workers they had had

'I didn't have a good relationship with any of my social workers up to that point. The social workers kept changing so I never got to know any of them. So, the only person I could speak to at that point was my IRO or my foster carer. So whenever we saw the IRO we would put everything on her to sort it out' (YP 16)

*'I've had three social workers since I've been in care.
In my whole life probably about 20' (YP 15)*

Barrier 1: high turnover of staff and inexperienced workforce

IROs in particular bemoaned the inexperience of social workers

'A lot of social workers don't really know what to expect from a Child in Care Review. Not all, but obviously you've got a lot of newly qualified social workers coming through and we have a lot of turnover of social workers' (IRO)

Barrier 2: Lack of understanding and training in participation

'I went to a training a few years ago in Manchester, the training for IROs is atrocious.' (IRO)

'Participation to me just means a group of people all working together for the same goal or achievement.' (Senior manager)

Barrier 3: High caseloads

SW and IROs raised high caseloads and ensuing time pressures as a barrier

'We have got so many kids coming into care, they're trying to manage going out and seeing children in between reviews-its really difficult- you wing it and you know you deal with crisis, but for me that is what social work is all about' (IRO)

'Social workers are so busy, they are so, so busy, and I don't mean just on the ground but in their heads. They've got so many things they are carrying, so many pressures.... They are not able to think ahead or plan ahead' (IRO)

Impact of this:

- 1) Reviews taking place on a child's birthday
- 2) Combining reviews with PEP meetings
- 3) No care plan and if there is one often not discussed with YP or parents

Zombie social work?

In research we frequently observe SWs doing a visit because they are meant to do one within a certain timescale (the “stat visit”). Their computer is literally flashing at them, they do the visit, fill in the form and the computer stops flashing. But the visit itself is often characterised by a purposelessness that leaves worker and family confused about what is happening..... To me this is symptomatic of a system which has developed an obsession with effective management, without sufficient attention to the wider values and aims of the service. It is like a zombie social work - moving and busy (very, very busy!) without any sense of being truly alive.

(Forrester 2016, p.12)

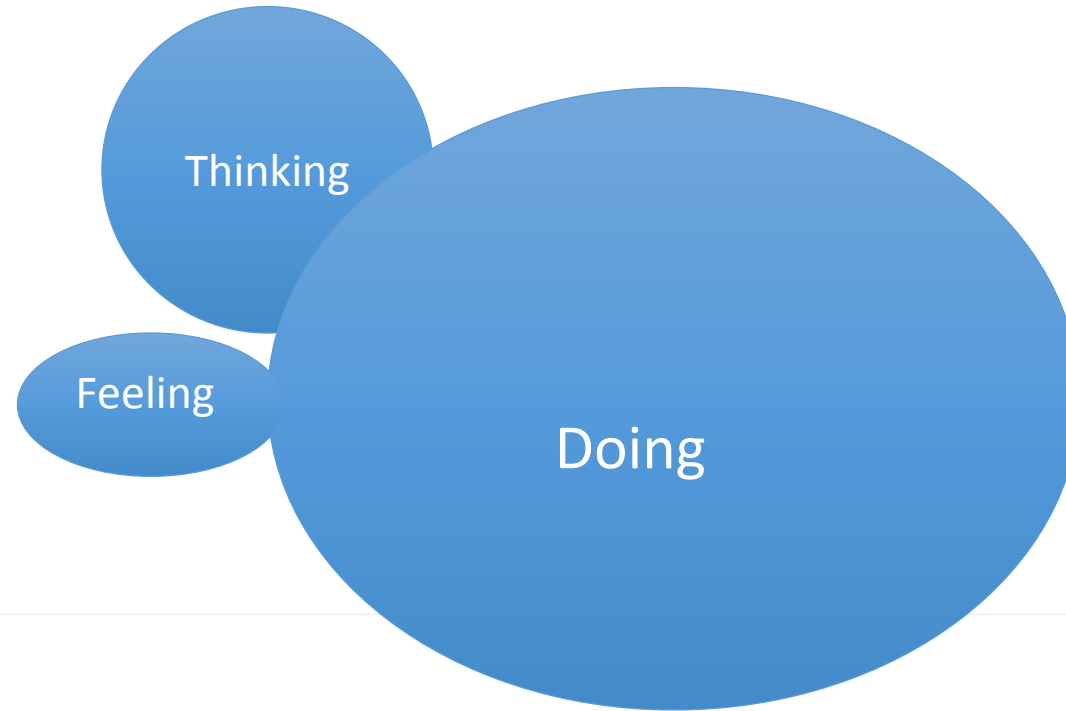
I am working in a factory

I am working in a factory... We produce initial and core assessments in our factory. Our management counts the assessments completed on a weekly basis and informs the workers of the results in teams meetings and by emails. The workers don't seem to care about these numbers but they preoccupy the management. There have been many changes in our factory in the past five years. The management has been replaced, the teams were reconstructed, the machinery (workers, forms, IT systems) also saw great changes.

The management measures (in percentages) the reports of initial and core assessments completed on time, and compare these to other teams. When the team manager reports these statistics in team meetings, I can recognise how my body becomes tense and my heart rate increases, and I get very angry. (...) I have voiced my resentment to this ritual, but it was ignored by managers and other colleagues.

(Cooper 2009, p.89)

Do we get balance right between thinking, feeling and doing? (Ruch 2014)



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Barrier 4 - Depersonalisation

All IROs and a number of the young people reported instances of professionals, in particular school staff and foster carers using meetings to chastise, rebuke and shame the young person.

'well I suppose they have got to feel safe... they feel like they are under the spotlight. They're kind of criticised, everybody's talking about them, everybody's looking at them, they are worried about bad things being said so that's the kind of thing which deters young people' (IRO)

Barrier 4: Depersonalisation

'I did a review the other day, boy was in year 7 with additional needs, there were 4 education representatives and the big male teacher, head of year wanted to take us through the whatever, 28 incidents, and he was just a tiny little boy, very small for his age with some physical disability, and I could just see him shrivelling up. So how on earth can you have a voice in a meeting if somebody just says 'oh, and you on the 14th of the month you called your teacher an effing bxxx or whatever' (IRO)

Foster carers and school staff were particularly seen as using reviews to blame YP.

Barrier 5: Disconnect/Dissonance

Although all 11 social workers reported that children's participation in reviews was very important to them, they also reported that they or the IRO (or the IRO admin) made all the key decisions about the review such as when it took place, where it took place, who was invited and what was on the agenda.

Links in with espoused theory (what professionals say they do) and theory in use (what they actually do) (Argyris and Schon 1974).

Barrier 6 care v. control- tokenistic participation

'I think it shows that a lot of what we do can be quite tokenistic.... You know, it's one thing going and getting the child's view before the review.. but on reflection that's still quite tokenistic. That's a visit to a child with a pre-set of questions for a meeting that isn't going to change it in structure and the actual issues can be pretty abstract and complex and they are very, very difficult to explain to a child' SW 6

SWs stated that when things were going well they could prioritise participation but not if things were going badly or in crisis - paternalistic approach

Enablers of meaningful participation

Quality of relationships between child and professionals

‘There was a time when like after the review – because my foster carers were telling her how I do drama and stuff like that, and there was another thing that she told her – and she was like “Oh can I come to your room and have a look?” So we did and we just sat there and chatted for a bit and it was nice but like informal and stuff like that. Yeah, so I’d say a little bit, a little bit of a relationship, yeah, ‘cos she was bonkers and I liked that!’ (YP 15 discussing her relationship with her IRO)

Enablers of good participation

Quality of relationships between child and professionals

'she was really nice. She was a lovely woman. It's just a shame that though because it says something because I would have liked to see her outside my reviews and stuff to have a catch up or a chat because she was really down to earth, but I never had a proper like meet with her before the review.' (YP 16 discussing his relationship with his IRO)

Child/young person chairing their own reviews

'I don't understand why people wouldn't want to chair it, in my perspective, because it's a bunch of people in a room talking about you.'
(YP17)

Those young people who chaired their own reviews had more meaningful engagement in the review process and had the opportunity to have a say or voice in respect of essential parts of the meeting, such as when it took place, where it took place, who was invited and what was on the agenda.

Senior Managers views

- Six of the seven senior managers did not see social work caseloads as an issue, this was in marked contrast to the perceptions of social workers, IROs and young people.
- Senior managers tended to see it as individual social worker's fault when meaningful participation did not happen - *'some of our social workers spend an awful lot of time sat in the office doing paperwork, and we hear a lot about that'*.
- Understanding of participation was mixed at times: *'it means CYP are fully engaged with –if we're talking about participation-with us. Fully engaged in our system.. Expressed their views in different forms'*.

Senior Manager views

SM 'if everybody was great and good at what they do then things tend to function but the barriers will often be around incompetence.

Communication- social workers who don't respond to you- it boils down to social work competence practice.'

'Well the example of good practice, a young person chairing their own review was from about 28 years ago, I don't think we have made much progress since then'.

Wilful blindness

Senior managers *'choose, sometimes consciously but mostly not, to remain unseeing in situations where they could know, and should know, but don't know because it makes us feel better not to know'* (Heffernon 2012)

Young people had a better understanding of the challenges that social workers faced than senior managers

Recommendations

- IROs and social worker caseloads to be reviewed and reduced with increased resources- IRO caseloads of between 50-70 maximum so they can visit children between reviews- meaningfully pre-meeting to consider the location for review, when it is going to take place, who will be reviewed and what will be on the agenda
- YP to receive training on participation and discussions at an early stage re them chairing their own meetings

Recommendations

- Senior Managers to spend at least two weeks a year shadowing social workers and every 5 years spend 3 months as a social worker in a duty team/MASH so they properly understand the pressures that social workers face
- Balance between time spent filling out forms/carrying out bureaucratic parts of the role and face to face time with families needs to change- better use of IT and modern technology
- Reviews should be more enjoyable for YP, a celebration of their last 6 months include eating their favourite food etc... more like FGC

Points to consider for future practice

- Is there anything that you as a practitioner or your service could do differently to improve children's participation in children in care reviews? In day to day decision making about their lives?
- How plausible is it to make those changes?
- One thing you will do differently because of this afternoon's session?

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Additional Reading

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