

**TOP  
TIPS**

November 2021

# For remote working in children's social work



Part of BASW England's 80-20 Campaign



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**Campaign**  
Promoting relationship  
based practice

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**BASW**  
**England**

The professional association for  
social work and social workers

# Remote working and the 80-20 Campaign

BASW England's 80-20 campaign is all about time. Social workers tell us that 80% of their time is spent on administrative tasks and not enough time (just 20%) is spent on direct relationship based social work and reflective practice.

We have created this remote working guide for social workers. The guide has been inspired by children and families social workers across the country who moved to remote and virtual working during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020. During this time, professionals adapted practice in a matter of days to fit in with social distancing requirements. This often meant direct work was taking place via digital platforms. We expect there will be different ways of working in the future, such as hybrid working. This resource highlights useful top tips for remote and virtual working.

**We hope you find the guide helpful.**

## Acknowledgements

BASW England would like to thank all the members of the 80-20 steering group, partners, people with lived experience of social work and our members from across the country who have contributed to this guide.

## IMPORTANT POINTS:

- ▶ **REMOTE CONNECTIVITY CAN BRIDGE A GEOGRAPHICAL GAP BETWEEN SOCIAL WORKERS AND THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THEY SUPPORT.**
- ▶ **SOME CHILDREN AND FAMILIES PREFER TO USE DIGITAL PLATFORMS AS A METHOD OF COMMUNICATION. THEY SHOULD BE GIVEN A CHOICE.**
- ▶ **SOME CHILDREN AND FAMILIES CAN BE EXCLUDED FROM ENGAGING WITH REMOTE AND DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY AS A RESULT OF INEQUALITY E.G., DIGITAL POVERTY.**
- ▶ **IN-PERSON RELATIONSHIP BASED SOCIAL WORK CANNOT AND SHOULD NOT BE COMPLETELY REPLACED WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY.**
- ▶ **REMOTE AND VIRTUAL WORKING CAN BE PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY DRAINING FOR ALL CONCERNED.**
- ▶ **ETHICS, VALUES, CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND CHILD-CENTRED WORK MUST BE PARAMOUNT.**

# Equality, diversity and inclusion

**1**

## **Examine funding resources to enable children and families to communicate and engage with services remotely.**

Not all families have the same resources for remote working such as laptops, mobile phones, secure internet connections and unlimited data usage. Furthermore, a lack of resources to engage remotely and digitally does not mean someone is unwilling to engage with services.

**2**

## **Adapt your practice and technology to suit the communication and cultural needs of the family.**

Re-adjustments will need to be made to make remote and digital practices inclusive of personal, cultural needs and disabilities. For example, this may include having a third party assist with interpreting for deaf people and people whose primary language may not be English. Be mindful that mental health issues may impact someone's level of engagement. Check people's preferred method of communication and what works for them.

**3**

## **Keep remote contact timely.**

Virtual interaction requires sustained concentration and intense attention to words. It can also lead to eye strain and fatigue. It is always best to discuss

and assess the optimum amount of time for virtual sessions. Regular breaks should also be offered, and permissions to stop a virtual meeting agreed in advance. Best practice and health and safety guidance recommend a break after one hour.

**4**

**Where telephone contact is the primary or only means of communication, make sure you consider how the individual or family you are working with feels and give additional time to build trust and understanding.**

It takes time to develop trusting relationships with those we work with. Telephone communication can have its own challenges. It can be harder to read a person's non-verbal communication, and individuals may take longer to trust someone they cannot see.

**5**

**The context of the meeting, such as a child protection conference or review meeting, sets up significant power imbalances between children and their carers and professionals, exacerbated by virtual meetings.**

Actively consider whether safe in-person meetings or hybrid arrangements are more empowering.

# Practical arrangements

Planning is essential with any direct work. Online and remote working has minimised in-person contact. However, there should still be preparation in advance of any contact.

## 1 **Make sure you know and understand the technology.**

If you are using video conferencing, be familiar with how it works and make sure any internet connections are secure and stable.

## 2 **Consider the alternative technology.**

Not everyone is happy with video conferencing, so consider alternatives where they exist, such as telephone calls/hybrid ways of working.

## 3 **Make sure you know your purpose.**

As in any in-person interaction, consider the purpose of your virtual session and plan what you intend to do. Think through your collective expected outcomes.

## 4 **Plan activities and manage expectations.**

Think about what activities you might undertake with children and be transparent about expectations with both children and adults.

## 5 **Use of appropriate portals and backdrops.**

Consider what a family you are working with might think of your backdrop, particularly if you are working from home. Maintain your professionalism and don't

share anything you would not do in the non-virtual world, such as photographs of your family and other personal items.

## **6 Ask for help.**

Think about co-working and tapping into the skills of your team. Could your colleagues support you if you are holding bigger and more formal meetings with families and professionals? This will help you to focus on the direct work and worry less about technical issues. Discussions on consent in advance may be required.

## **7 Give everyone space to be heard.**

When working with groups, listen to one person at a time, give everyone time and space to share their views, and manage conversations. Putting hands up virtually and physically can work with larger groups.

## **8 Promote equality of technology knowledge.**

Allow time for others to get online and be familiar with the technology, particularly families who may not have had as much time to become adept with the technology, software packages, and formats you may use daily.

## **9 Have netiquette rules.**

Ground rules apply to the remote and virtual world as much as they do in-person, and there are some specific issues for digital technology. Make everyone aware of the facilities and purpose of the mute function, explain that chat functions should be used appropriately and above all, ensure everyone treats each other with respect.

# Relational based practice

## **1 Remote working with children does not mean that everything should be digital.**

You can, for example, prepare an activity pack dependent on age, ability, gender etc., for the family and provide pens and pencils. The family can work through the pack as part of ongoing direct work. This can also form a starting point for discussion during future in-person and virtual appointments.

## **2 Consider the preferences of the children you work with.**

Consider whether a child or children prefers or needs visual aids, words, sounds (e.g., British Sign Language, Makaton) etc. Always consider preferred methods of communication by actively co-producing what this will specifically look like and agree an action plan. Communicate with the child, family and other professionals to identify what may work for specific children. Examples of digital resources can be found on the BASW 80-20 webpage.

## **3 Online games can help to build relationships with children.**

The 80-20 campaign supports using the digital kitbag\* to play informal games, build rapport, and assist children in telling their story. Where the software is unavailable, there are some non-digital options (see next section for additional ideas).



#### **4 Use conversation prompts.**

Keep your conversation in focus using visual prompts. They can range from “emojis” to images of comic book characters to represent different events, tell their story and express feelings.

#### **5 Make your space engaging.**

Do think about how you might maintain the attention of a child or young person you are working with. This could include how you prepare your backdrop be that virtual or non-virtual. You might want to include something colourful and something which might stimulate discussion without compromising your personal details.

#### **6 Remember your interpersonal skills.**

The way you apply these will need to be modified. You may for example have to consider verbal cues more such as changes in voice tone and periods of silence when having an audio telephone call. With video conferencing eye contact and non-verbal communication such as body language will be limited.

#### **7 Concentrate on the relationship.**

Do check in and be interested in people. When you cannot rely on body language or unconscious cues do ask how people are feeling whenever you can to help pick up on personal information.

\* BASW 80/20 webpage: [www.basw.co.uk/8020-campaign-relationship-based-social-work](http://www.basw.co.uk/8020-campaign-relationship-based-social-work)

**8 Compensate for the loss of eye contact.**

Where eye contact is preferred but not possible, physically orient yourself toward the person and flick your eye gaze between camera and person.

**9 Explain silences.**

Silence in the non-virtual world can be a good thing. Online it can feel awkward. Staring at someone and not speaking may feel strange. Slow down and allow for pauses or acknowledge the pause by saying something like, "I'm just having a think".

**10 Take your time.**

Pace the meeting, allow appropriate time and build in flexibility regarding the duration of the session.

**11 Don't over-do screen time.**

Remember the length of sessions, which can be emotionally and physically draining. This also applies to adults you are working with. Consider the different needs and abilities of children when planning online sessions, include diversity, age and emotional needs.

**12 Communicate empathy to build trust and rapport.**

When expressing yourself and communicating empathy, you may have to be creative in your means of communication. Actively listen and reaffirm feelings. You may need to be more explicit with facial gestures to compensate for the loss of body language interpretation.

## **13 Keep parents informed as you would do in the non-virtual world.**

Children have a right to privacy but don't forget that parents should be working partners where possible. Be clear on why you might choose to share information with parents and carers.

### **Examples of relational activities**

#### **1. Memory jar**

A jar with a screw top and small coloured slips of card or paper can be used for various things. Jars are sometimes used to collect items such as twigs and flowers, which can be used for messages and thoughts. Jars and bottles can also be used to reflect on memories that are shared between family members and also as a means of stating what they wish could change.

#### **2. A paper aeroplane**

You could ask the child/family to write down their goals for the year, for example, and decorate it (before throwing it as far as they can!). For those who cannot write, encourage drawing or simply talk through any goals before throwing the plane.

#### **3. A sock puppet**

You could ask a child to draw a happy face on one and a sad face on the other, using this as a conversation point for 'what's going well'/'what are your worries'.

#### 4. Words and pictures

Used effectively in the Signs of Safety practice approach; the practitioner works collaboratively with the child and family to draw significant events and express powerful feelings and emotions (worries or concerns; what's going well/strengths).

The practitioner could prepare a words and pictures poster, share it online in the virtual session, and then talk to it to get feedback. Alternatively, the young person could prepare and then show and explain it to you.

#### 5. Use a Kitbag

The BASW 80-20 Talking and Listening to Children (TLC) Kitbag campaign supports the take-up of kitbags as a resource for promoting and enhancing communication with children and their families.

Kitbags are available in both digital and physical formats. Further details can be found on the BASW website.

### Examples of activities without equipment:

- Charades.
- I Spy.
- Two truths one lie.
- "Finish my sentence" story telling.

# Safeguarding and welfare

## **1 Don't use virtual visits as a replacement for safety checks which can only be achieved through a home visit.**

Remember that remote working should work for you and, crucially, the children and families you are supporting. As such, it should not replace statutory requirements. Physical visits and engaging all your senses and curiosity is vital for safe child protection practice. Each family situation needs to be carefully risk assessed in relation to visiting arrangements and virtual working.

## **2 Have a plan to counter the threat of coercion and abuse, such as code words for those at risk of abuse.**

Be mindful that perpetrators of abuse might be able to see and hear what is being said.

## **3 If you need to guarantee privacy, an in-person appointment away from the family home may be the safest option.**

If you feel that a child or parent needs to be given a safe place to share personal details, then a remote conversation with that person in their home is probably not the safest way to do this.

#### **4 Be aware of isolation and mental health issues.**

Virtual working can connect people and therefore be beneficial for mental health and isolation issues. However, virtual working can also mask mental health and isolation. In-person visits can and should remain an important way to provide direct support.

#### **5 Make sure you are supported to use the technology ethically and safely.**

Employers should have policies and practice guidance on what digital platforms/tools you can use, but this can be an evolving issue. Keep abreast of organisational policy and what technologies you can use when working with children and families. Keep yourself informed on matters relating to internet safety, confidentiality and ethical issues. Have a look at the BASW digital capabilities on the BASW website for further guidance\*.

\* BASW Digital capabilities webpage: Digital capabilities for social workers  
[www.basw.co.uk/resources/publications-policies-and-reports/digital-capabilities-social-workers](http://www.basw.co.uk/resources/publications-policies-and-reports/digital-capabilities-social-workers)

# Professional wellbeing and care

**Social work is a rewarding career. It can also be physically and emotionally draining. Don't compromise your practice by ignoring your own wellbeing. Remember that relationship based social work includes the self, you.**

**1**

## **Remember your own welfare.**

Working from home means that we are bringing some of the risks we encounter in our work into our safe place. Find ways with colleagues and employers to maintain your professional and personal boundaries.

**2**

## **Communicate with colleagues.**

Have catch-ups with colleagues and/or friends (virtual and in-person) and make sure supervision offers you the opportunity to reflect on your working conditions. Seek help and share your feelings.

**3**

## **Take a break and factor in debrief time.**

Try to avoid back-to-back meetings and virtual visits. Take regular lunch and coffee breaks. Exercise when you can.

**4**

## **Work/life balance.**

Be flexible and try to create work/life balance. Limit the exposure of work in your home environment. Switch off your work phone and laptop when not at work.

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