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What Knowledge and Skills Do Early Career Social Workers Need to Practice Effectively With Children and Families?

Lisa Bostock  | Laura Shephard  | Louise Grant 

Institute of Applied Social Research, University Square, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK

Correspondence: Lisa Bostock (lisa.bostock@beds.ac.uk)

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ABSTRACT

There is an extensive literature base about the knowledge and skills required by social workers to work effectively with children and their families. However, making sense of how best to translate this into direct practice can be challenging, particularly when newly qualified. The paper is based on a wider rapid evidence assessment (REA) of the post-qualifying knowledge and skills required by early career social workers (ECSWs) to practice effectively with children and their families. The REA involved searching for relevant English language literature (2012–2023) in ASSIA, Social Care Online, SocINDEX and PsycInfo and specialist journals. However, it was soon apparent that the literature was not segmented by career stage and wider searches relating to knowledge and skills needed to be undertaken. In total, 51 papers were included for review. Studies identified were largely qualitative, exploring the knowledge and skills required through observations of direct practice and self-report studies from the perspectives of social workers and children and families themselves. Where knowledge and skills were identified, relationship building and good authority skills were associated with some improved outcomes for family members. The review presents findings through practice-near descriptions of what works to build early career expertise with children and their families.

1 | Introduction

Social work with children and families is a highly skilful profession that demands an extensive knowledge base (Trevithick 2000, 2008). Social workers must weave together knowledge from different sources in their conversations with colleagues and family members with the aim of affecting change for children. Informed by the values, ethics and professional expectations of practice (Social Work England 2019), they use their knowledge and skills to engage effectively in often complex and challenging scenarios (Ferguson 2011). These conversations often take place alone, in family homes, described as the invisible trade of social work (Pithouse 2019). For early career social workers (ECSWs), within the first 5 years of their professional career (Grant et al. 2022),

navigating the everyday complexities of practice can be particularly daunting.

This is reflected in the international evidence base that has reported a theory-practice gap for those entering professional social work practice following qualification (Al-Ma'seb et al. 2013; Jansen 2018; Langarita et al. 2022; Rentea et al. 2024; Segev et al. 2022). Furthermore, a narrative review of social work skills, Karpets (2018, 611) highlights that while social work students and ECSWs are expected to consult the evidence base 'to enrich their knowledge about social work skills, they will come across a theoretical confusion on how specific social work skills are translated into practice behaviours'. Therefore, some social workers feel ill equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills (Jansen 2018) for the realities of practice, which

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can lead to an early exit from the profession due to stress and lack of support (Johnson et al. 2021; Murphy 2025; Social Work England 2023).

To support ECSWs' practice effectively, governments in the USA (Council on Social Work Education 2022), Canada (Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators 2012), Aotearoa New Zealand (Ballantyne et al. 2022) and the UK, including Wales (Social Care Wales 2017), Scotland (Scottish Social Services Council 2019) and Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Social Care Council 2022) have developed professional standards frameworks for newly qualified social workers. These standards define the knowledge and skills that ECSWs should possess to maintain professional registration, and hence, what service users should expect from social work services (Harding and Beresford 1996).

In England, the Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS) for child and family social work (Department for Education 2018) sets out what is expected of qualified social workers. The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (BASW 2018) provides an overview of expectations by career stage. However, these existing approaches have limitations; the PCF is not specific nor detailed to child and family social work and the KSS does not distinguish by career stage for those working directly with children and families. This leaves a gap in understanding as to which knowledge skills and are required for an ECSW in child and family social work (MacAlister 2022) leading to a lack of clarity in expectations of them and targeted support to enable them to become confident practitioners.

In response to this identified gap, the UK Government has proposed new post-qualifying standards (PQS) for child and family social workers that are intended to enhance the transition from initial education and support workers through their first years in the profession. This framework aims to both improve practice and support retention (Department for Education 2025a). It includes a new, 2-year, social work induction programme (SWIP) for child and family social workers qualifying in England, which will replace the current 1-year programme, the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (Department for Education 2025b). To support the new SWIP, the authors of this article were commissioned by the Department for Education in England to undertake a rapid evidence review of the knowledge and skills required by ECSWs when working with children and their families to inform the development of this induction programme.

While there have been previous reviews in the mid-2010s (Croisdale-Appleby 2014; Narey 2014), which focused on the knowledge and skills required for social workers on qualification, there have been few that have looked at post-qualifying requirements. What distinguishes the present rapid review, is its focus on reviewing evidence for effective post-qualifying knowledge and skills required to support ECSWs to grow their expertise. To address this gap this paper is based on a wider rapid evidence assessment (REA) of the post-qualifying knowledge and skills required by child and family social workers (Grant et al. 2025). The current review addresses the following question: What knowledge and skills do ECSWs need to practice effectively with children and families?

2 | Methods

The review question required a focus both on knowledge and skills and how these are effectively implemented in social work practice. However, establishing effectiveness in child and family social work is both complex and subject to criticism. Nevertheless, there is consensus that evidence regarding quality of practice, learning from lived experiences as well as measurable outcome data are essential to ensure that children's social work services are achieving their intended outcomes: promoting and protecting the welfare of children (La Valle et al. 2019). For the purposes of this review, effectiveness refers to the degree to which social work practices are making a positive difference in the lives of children and their families.

Given that the review was designed to support development of the new SWIP, the authors adopted an epistemological position of pragmatism (Kaushik and Walsh 2019) or more specifically, what Dewey (1938) preferred to term 'the theory of inquiry'. For Dewey, the primary purpose of inquiry is to create knowledge in the interest of change and improvement (Goldkuhl 2012). In other words, 'pragmatism offers an experience-based, action-oriented framework whereby the purpose of research is to help us address the issues of dealing with how we experience and come to know the world in a practical sense' (Kaushik and Walsh 2019, 9).

The methods used to identify and organize material draw on the REA toolkit (Government Social Research Service 2014). REAs (hereafter referred to as evidence review) provide a quick synthesis of the evidence by shortening the traditional systematic review process. An REA can address more than one type of question, combining impact questions or 'what works' or what is effective questions with nonimpact questions, that include 'needs' questions about what people need, in this case what ECSWs need to practice effectively with children and families. This is congruent with a pragmatist epistemology that privileges a pluralist approach to knowledge creation as relevant to the research or in this case, review question.

2.1 | Search Strategy

Searches were undertaken between January and February 2023 via the following electronic databases: ASSIA, Social Care Online, SocINDEX and PsycInfo. In addition, three specialist journals were searched: British Journal of Social Work, Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Social Work Practice. A standard search date of post-2011 was used to reflect changes in policy and practice guidance following the Munro (2011) review of child protection and recommendations to focus on skills required in frontline practice. Due to tight timescales, the review was restricted to English language studies and only included evidence from UK-based sources. Key searches included:

- Population: 'social work*' AND child* OR 'young people' OR adolescen* OR famil* OR parent*; 'newly qualified' or NQSW 'assessed and supported year in employment' OR ASYE 'early career'; 'experience' 'practice experience' 'career stages' OR 'career development' AND (*combinations of the below*).

- Outcomes: outcome* OR impact OR effective*.
- Knowledge and skills: knowledge OR skill* OR awareness OR understand* AND.
- Knowledge (about): 'child in need'; 'child protection'; 'section 17'; 'safeguard*'; "section 47"; 'significant harm'; 'early help'; 'child development'; parenting; 'behaviour change' 'domestic abuse' OR 'intimate partner violence'; drug* OR substance*; 'emotional abuse'; 'physical abuse'; 'sexual abuse'; 'female genital mutilation' or FGM; 'learning disab*'; 'toxic trio'; 'adverse childhood experiences' or ACES or 'ACE scor*'; trauma*.
- Skills (required): assess*; authorit*; compassion*; 'decision making'; empathy; reflex* or reflect*; relationship; 'direct work'; collaboration; 'risk assess*'; restorative; multiagency or multidisciplinary or interagency or multiagency or integrated or multiprofessional.

2.2 | Eligibility Criteria

Initial searches focused on literature that reported associations between ECSW knowledge and skills and impact on practice and outcomes for children and families. However, it was soon apparent that the literature was not segmented by career stage. At this point, a decision was made to continue with the review, noting its limitations and include the wider literature on the knowledge and skills needed to practice effectively with children and families. The aim was to provide a review that could assist ECSWs in transitioning from a generic education to specialist practice.

Papers identified via title, abstract and full-text retrieval, where available, were assessed against the following eligibility criteria: date of publication before 2012; insufficient details to identify reference or no abstract to screen; language not English; publication type not journal or research report; location not UK; population type not child and family social work; scope not social work knowledge, skills or competencies, effectiveness, outcomes or impact; research type not academic research report or peer reviewed journal article.

2.3 | Critical Appraisal

In line with a pragmatist epistemology, included studies were critically appraised to ensure relevance to the review in terms of utility for ECSW practice, and that findings were reliable. The three dimensions of the weight of evidence (WoE) framework (Gough 2007) was applied to assess: firstly, methodological quality (trustworthiness of the evidence); secondly, both relevance of the research design; and thirdly, study focus for answering the review question. To be assessed as 'high quality' across all three dimensions, studies needed to explicitly define and investigate the impact of social worker knowledge and skills and on outcomes for children and/or families. Any studies that were rated poorly for methodological quality were excluded at this stage, on the basis that even if relevant, findings may be unreliable.

2.4 | Data Analysis and Synthesis

Template analysis (King 2012) was used to develop a coding framework based on a priori codes of 'knowledge' and 'skills' to analyse included items. Drawing on the social work practice skills framework developed by Forrester et al. (2018, 2019, 2020), review findings were further categorised by relationship building with children or parents and carers and what Ferguson (2011) defines as 'good authority' (the social worker's skilful exercise of statutory powers). Further subthemes were generated by topic, such as risk assessment and decision making. Two additional main themes were identified: partnership working and reflective practice. The final coding template was applied to the whole dataset of included literature and was used by all the researchers in the study and cross checked for validation.

3 | Findings

The search returned 1250 items of literature, and 51 items were included for review. Figure 1 illustrates the flow of studies through the evidence review process. Just two (Forrester et al. 2019, 2020) of the 51 included studies were judged as 'high' quality across all three WoE dimensions (see evidence table, supplied separately as [Supporting Information](#)). While many of the 51 included studies provided rich detail on social work practice with children and families, they were not designed to measure the impact of knowledge and skills on outcomes and hence, were rated as 'medium' quality. Studies that did not meet relevance criteria ($n=27$) or demonstrate methodological robustness ($n=3$) were excluded.

3.1 | Types of Study Included

Studies included were primarily self-report ($n=25$), using interviews, focus groups and surveys of social workers to better understand their practice experiences. Thirteen studies were undertaken with parents only ($n=6$) and children and young people (CYP) only ($n=7$). Thirteen studies included a combination of social workers and parents ($n=9$), social workers and CYP ($n=7$), and one study included social workers, parents and CYP. A significant number ($n=15$) of studies included observational research using practice-near methods such as ethnography and analysis audio recordings of direct social work practice. Practice-near research refers to a cluster of methodologies that aim to get as near as possible to the relational and emotional experience of real world practice (Ferguson 2016; Froggett and Briggs 2012). Five studies were mixed methods, with three combining qualitative approaches with quantitative measures to understand social worker skills. Four studies were based on secondary analysis including evidence reviews ($n=3$) and review ($n=1$) of documentation from serious case reviews. Two studies based on the same randomized control trial (RCT) assessed the quality of social work skills on parental outcomes. [Supporting Information](#) in the form of an evidence table is supplied separately to the main review paper. The evidence table details included studies by author, design, participant type, a priori code and related subtheme. Due to the heterogeneity of types of study included, findings are grouped by a priori theme and presented narratively.

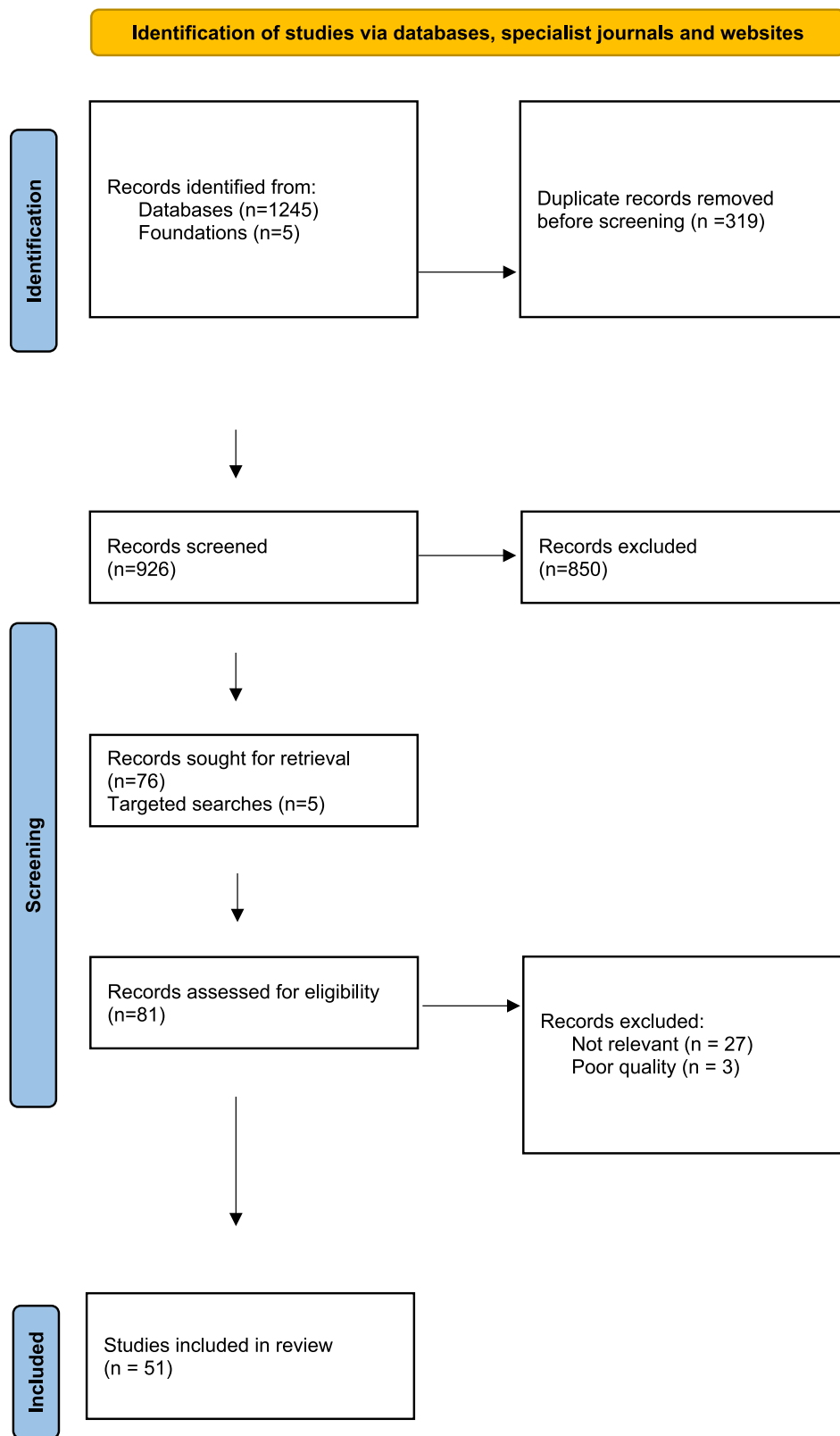


FIGURE 1 | PRISMA diagram* illustrating flow of studies through the review process. *Source:* *PRISMA diagram adapted from Page et al. (2021).

3.2 | Knowledge Underpinning Relationship Building With Children and Families

The first theme to be identified related to relationship building. Kohli and Dutton (2018, 78) define effective relationships as those

characterized by ‘honesty, clarity, reliability, kindness, warmth and precision’. Several studies reviewed suggested that building effective relationships with children and families required an understanding of child development (North 2022; Bernard and Greenwood 2019; Handley and Doyle 2014). In particular, the

importance of attachment theory was highlighted to understand the impact of different attachment styles on relationship building (Whincup 2017; Gatsou et al. 2017; North 2022). Some studies explored the understanding and application of theoretically informed practice methods for relationship building, including motivational interviewing (Forrester et al. 2018, 2019, 2020) and systemic practice (Bostock et al. 2019; Gatsou et al. 2017). One study (Lester et al. 2020) focused on how the experiences of young people with complex attachment histories impacted on their ability to form trusting relationships.

Three studies identified how understanding the child in wider context was dependent on knowledge of sociological theories, particularly in relation to the impact of poverty and socioeconomic status on parenting and child development (Morris et al. 2018; Bernard 2019; Bernard and Greenwood 2019). In Morris et al.'s (Morris et al. 2018, 370) study, poverty is described as the 'wallpaper' of social work practice, 'too big to tackle and too familiar to notice'. Social workers in this study recognized that poverty, poor housing, mental illness, domestic abuse and substance misuse were intertwined and served to undermine parents' capacity to care for their children.

Only two studies reviewed considered cultural competence and the need for culturally sensitive practice. Tarr and Gupta (2022) found that social workers, especially white social workers, often lacked knowledge and understanding of cultural differences, meaning that some found it difficult to address risks to children due to the fear of appearing racist. Okpokiri's (2021) study of social work with Nigerian families concluded that effective engagement depended on social workers approaching families with curiosity about their hopes and aspirations for their children, rather than adopting an adversarial position that created barriers to working in partnership.

3.3 | Relationship Building Skills With Children and Young People

A small suite of studies reviewed provided evidence of social workers' skills in relationship building. Ruch et al. (2017) found that to develop trusting relationships with children and young people, social workers had to give thought to planning for encounters, both with children they already knew and those they had never met. Examples given for how relationships with children could be built included social workers making sure that their name and role was clear to children, that they discussed confidentiality in age-appropriate ways and that they were friendly and empathic but clear about the purpose for their involvement (Whincup 2017; Ferguson 2016; Jobe and Gorin 2013; Lester et al. 2020; Whincup 2017; Ruch et al. 2017; Stabler et al. 2020).

The importance of age-appropriate practice was highlighted in the observational studies reviewed, and these indicate how social workers differentiated their approach to relationship building with children of different ages. Two studies considered effective attunement with infants, which was achieved through touch and voice. With parents' agreement, social workers held babies or engaged with them by making eye contact and talking to them in a high pitched 'sing-song' voice, accompanied with

gentle squeezing of the hands, arms, legs and feet (Winter 2017; Ferguson et al. 2022). Social workers achieved 'energetic attunement' with toddlers through eye contact, smiling, singing, clapping and letting a toddler climb on them (Ferguson et al. 2022; Winter 2017). This allowed them to attune to the needs of the baby or toddler to hold them in mind and avoid being overly drawn into the needs of the parent (Bernard and Greenwood 2019; Ferguson 2016).

In relation to practice with primary school aged children, a wide range of direct work tools were identified as having been used by social workers to support effective relationship building. These included toys, games, colouring pens and paper, beads, Lego, puppets, sand play sets, messy play activities, baking and story or drama-based activities and worksheets (Ruch et al. 2017; Ferguson 2016; Whincup 2017; Winter 2017; Handley and Doyle 2014). Winter (2017) found that it was not enough to simply bring toys or talk about them, social workers had to actively engage the child. In this study, a social worker made bracelets with a child while chatting casually, before carefully raising the reason for the visit.

Social workers who built effective relationships demonstrated to the child that they had held the child in mind (see Fonagy 2006). In the studies reviewed, this was achieved through sharing memories from their last interaction and recalling small details such as the child's favourite biscuit (Ruch et al. 2017; Winter 2017; Whincup 2017). They used the toys and other items in their bedrooms to engage with children, thereby softening the intrusive aspects of the bedroom inspection in child protection visits (Ferguson 2016; Ruch et al. 2017). Winter's (2017) research highlighted that one practitioner wore socks with Mr. Happy and Mr. Sad characters on them and engaged a child who was otherwise reluctant to speak by asking which sock best matched the child's mood. This active and enthusiastic approach to relationship building was viewed as particularly important because parents may have warned their children not to talk to a social worker (Ferguson et al. 2022). This was supported by Jobe and Gorin (2013) who noted that children themselves may feared being taken into care, meaning that they could be reluctant to engage.

Six studies reviewed considered work with adolescents and the importance of effective communication. In two studies, the social worker's car was frequently used as a site for engaging teenagers (Lester et al. 2020; Ferguson 2016). Social workers engaged in conversations about hobbies, pets and computer games to build rapport (Winter 2017) and skilfully weaved conversations between 'safer' and more challenging topics (Winter 2017; Cook 2020; Ruch et al. 2017). Whincup (2017) found that they also 'protected' children from professional forums that could be experienced as intimidating with careful preparation and debrief to be sure the child understood what would happen and what the outcomes might be.

3.4 | Relationship Building Skills With Parents

A RCT carried out by Forrester et al. (2019) found evidence that social workers' relationship building skills were associated with higher levels of parental engagement. The findings of one

qualitative study by Lever Taylor et al. (2019) suggest that parents engaged more effectively with social workers where they felt 'known', listened to and understood, which subsequently enabled better information sharing and more effective risk assessment. Another study carried out by Kettle (2018) observed that social workers carefully balanced the need to engage with parents on an emotional level, while not becoming so focused on the parents' perspective that they became 'enmeshed' thus losing the ability to adequately protect the child. A number of studies reviewed suggest that they did this by carving out time with the child while managing the dynamics of working with parents and children together (Cook 2020; Ferguson 2016; Robbins and Cook 2018; Ruch et al. 2017; Whincup 2017; Winter 2017), while creating space for the parents' perspective (Bostock and Koprowska 2022; Lynch et al. 2019).

Six studies reviewed specifically considered parents' perspectives of social workers' practice. Mason (2012) found that for parents, practice was defined as effective when shared goals were agreed with social workers, which indicated commitment to working in partnership. Two studies reported that parents appreciated social workers who seemed genuinely caring and who were not interacting with them solely because it was their job (Lever Taylor et al. 2019; Mason 2012). In two studies, parents reported that they valued social workers who provided 'hands-on' support, including access to resources and solutions to practical problems (Mason 2012; Stabler et al. 2020). Parents interviewed also highlighted that they favoured social workers who shared details about meetings in terms of why they were happening and who was going to be there, and who promptly shared paperwork (Lucas 2019; Baginsky 2023). Boyle et al. (2019) identified that parents felt supported by social workers who offered praise and recognized change, were clear and honest in their approach and did not make them feel like they were under surveillance.

3.5 | Knowledge Underpinning 'Good Authority' in Practice

A second key theme that emerged from the studies reviewed relates to 'good authority'. Ferguson (2011:71) defined 'good authority' as the exercise of a social worker's statutory powers 'in a skillful, empathic yet forthright manner'.

Several studies discussed the knowledge that social workers needed to practice with good authority. Firstly, social workers needed to be able to identify where abuse had met thresholds of significant harm (North 2022; Cowley et al. 2018; Wilkins 2015; Kirk and Duschinsky 2017). However, Braye et al. (2013) found that social workers did not always have a thorough understanding of how legislation related to their practice. Secondly, it included recognizing different forms of harm. Domestic abuse was explicitly addressed in two studies reviewed. Morrison (2015) focused on how social workers should practice with both nonabusive and abusive parents, including after parental relationships have ended, whereas Robbins and Cook's (2018) study focused on the power dynamics in abusive relationships. This latter study explored how social workers needed to recognize that these power dynamics could inadvertently be replicated between professionals and

the family, and that building trusting relationships should be prioritized. In relation to sexual abuse, two studies identified that social workers needed to understand the ways in which children may disclose sexual abuse and understand 'normal' sexual development in childhood (Kwhali et al. 2016; Martin et al. 2014). Two studies considered social work interventions with parents with mental distress (Gatsou et al. 2017; Martins and Tucker 2023), and only one study considered learning disabilities (Lewis et al. 2015). These studies highlighted how social workers sometimes struggled to talk to parents about mental illness or intellectual disability with confidence and empathy for fear of offending them. Only one study (Galvani 2015) considered parental substance misuse. This was explored from the perspective of children, noting that children wanted social workers to know that a reduction in parental risk factors did not necessarily increase safety for them as children.

The ability to recognize where 'drift' was occurring was identified in two studies, emphasizing the importance of avoiding the normalization of neglectful circumstances where professionals became inured to ongoing harm (Brandon et al. 2014; Hicks and Stein 2015). The consequence of this could at worst be a failure to recognize where parent-child relationships had become so poor that parents had ceased to provide even basic levels of care to their children. Two papers reporting on the study (Bernard 2019; Bernard and Greenwood 2019) considered specifically the ways in which social workers needed to be aware of the social structures and power dynamics that could impact on their ability to identify and address neglect in affluent families.

While there was little segmentation by career stage regarding 'good authority' in the literature (Kettle 2018), noted that experienced social workers were more conscious of complexity and less likely to believe that simple solutions would solve a family's problems.

3.6 | Good Authority Skills With Parents

Forrester et al.'s (2019) study on the relationship between social worker skills and outcomes found that 'good authority' skills were associated with parents reporting a better family life and improvements in family functioning. The concept of 'good authority' has been broken down into three components in the literature: purposefulness; clarity about concerns; and child focus (Whittaker et al. 2016).

Firstly, 'purposefulness' refers to the degree to which the social worker sets out and keeps to their plan for a meeting or intervention, while being flexible in relation to the family's agenda (Whittaker et al. 2016). Both quantitative and qualitative studies have found evidence of purposefulness in social worker interactions with parents, evidenced most obviously by agreeing an agenda, or purpose, for meetings together (Ferguson 2016; Forrester et al. 2019; Ruch et al. 2017).

Secondly, 'clarity of concern' relates to the extent to which the social worker has clear, meaningful dialogue with parents about what the issues or concerns are, why professionals are

involved and where required, to respectfully challenge parents' accounts. Being clear about concerns was identified in three ethnographic studies in which social workers' direct practice with families was observed (Whittaker et al. 2016; Kettle 2018; Ferguson 2018). The ability to work with uncertainty was also evident in Wilkins' (2015) exploration of how social workers responded to referrals where there was a lack of clarity about what was happening for children. In this study, social workers needed to identify risk, protective and resilience factors from sometimes very limited sources of information, while recognizing what they did not know, as well as reflecting on where they were they might be making assumptions.

Thirdly, 'child focus' refers to what degree the child's voice and needs are 'meaningfully integrated into the discussion to enhance the parents' understanding of the child's needs' (Whittaker et al. 2016, 53). Social workers who demonstrated child focus were observed to have been tactful but assertive when asking to view children's bedrooms or to speak to children directly (Ferguson 2016; Ruch et al. 2017). For example, in Winter's (2017) ethnographic study, one social worker carrying out the inspection of the home actively engaged with the children by having a game of 'hide and seek', bringing fun into the encounter without losing sight of the purpose of this task. Five studies found evidence that social workers were skilled in balancing the need to make space for parents' anger or other difficult emotions, while not losing focus on the child (North 2022; Bernard and Greenwood 2019; Ferguson 2016; Cook 2020; Kettle 2018). Nevertheless, Ferguson's (2017) ethnographic research noted how children can become 'invisible' in child protection social work. He highlighted that eye contact, talk, touch, play, close observation and active listening skills were crucial for children to remain in mind. In other words, relationship building skills and 'good authority' skills were closely intertwined.

One facet of 'good authority' identified was an active recognition of the power imbalance inherent in the relationships between social workers and parents and children (Kettle 2018). Several studies reviewed explored how social workers used microlevel strategies to moderate power differences, by choosing carefully where they sat or stood in relation to parents and children. In one study, where the parent was seated, a social worker sat on her haunches to avoid towering over the parent from a standing position due to no other chairs (Ferguson et al. 2022). In another example, a male social worker made a quick judgement about power and gender, choosing to sit in a teenage girl's bedroom doorway to talk to her, rather than next to her on her bed (Winter 2017). Social workers responded politely but carefully when asked if they were themselves parents, balancing boundaries around self-disclosure with relationship building skills (Archard 2021). Two studies reviewed highlighted that pregnant mothers involved in prebirth safeguarding procedures wanted to be involved in decision making and to feel that the social worker had taken their needs into account as well as those of the unborn baby (Lever Taylor et al. 2019; Critchley 2020). Finding an appropriate balance between assessing need and assessing risk was also an important skill in relation to effective child protection practice where concerns related to parental mental illness (Martins and Tucker 2023) and forced marriage (Tarr and Gupta 2022).

3.7 | Evocation

The skill of evocation is associated with motivational interviewing and requires the social worker to draw out the parent's own intrinsic motivation for change, drawing on their strengths and skills, rather than dictating what the parent should do or why. Evocation was identified as a key skill in two studies by the same authors (Forrester et al. 2019, 2020). Forrester et al.'s (2019) research demonstrated that evocation had the strongest relationship with parental goal achievement and improvements in their perception of family life following social work intervention. Lasting change was more likely to occur where the parent's own desire for change was the driver. Social workers who elicited motivation effectively tended to do so in all conversations with parents, rather than during specific interventions about behaviour change issues (Forrester et al. 2020). Evocation was not explored in any other studies reviewed.

3.8 | Knowledge Required for Effective Multiagency Working

To safeguard children effectively, collaborative working with other agencies is essential for identifying and protecting children who are at risk or experiencing harm (HM Government 2023). Studies reviewed identified that social workers needed to ensure that each agency knew who was responsible for which area and that there were timescales for review and clear lines of accountability (Martins and Tucker 2023; Peckover and Trotter 2014). Kettle (2018) note that families could present differently to different agencies, meaning that risk was sometimes missed.

Two studies considered specifically the knowledge that underpinned the relationship between social workers and health professionals. Cowley et al. (2018) identified that social workers needed to understand how medical professionals identified nonaccidental head trauma and that this could be open to clinical interpretation. Martins and Tucker (2023) examined joint working between children's and adult mental health services where parents have a personality disorder. They identified that lack of training on personality disorder contributed specifically to a lack of knowledge in this area. Only one study considered the knowledge social workers needed to collaborate effectively with the police (Kwhali et al. 2016). In this study on child sexual abuse, it was noted that social workers needed to understand the process of a police investigation so that they could provide support without impeding the gathering of evidence.

3.9 | Multiagency Working Skills

In relation to the skills needed for multiagency working, two studies highlighted that social workers needed to pay careful attention to interagency relationships and communication to support their understanding of what was happening to protect children in different parts of the system (Heron and Black 2023; Kettle 2018). Organizational systems could create barriers to interagency working, meaning that the balance

between confidentiality and information sharing had to be carefully considered (Martins and Tucker 2023). This included developing a shared understanding between children's services and adult services working with the parents to explain each agency's remit and priorities (Davidson et al. 2012). Tensions between agencies needed to be explored and gaps addressed, for example, in Peckover and Trotter's (2014) study of multiagency approaches to domestic abuse, a social worker had believed that the probation service was addressing domestic abuse risks, whereas the probation service was focusing solely on risks around managing shoplifting and burglary offences.

3.10 | Reflective Practice and Use of Supervision

Social workers practice with families in situations where there are rarely clear answers (Ferguson 2018). While in theory, supervision and other meetings provide social workers with the opportunity to explore uncertainty, Heron and Black's (2023) observational study found that this could be constrained by lack of curiosity, bureaucracy, performance issues and systemic pressure. This may also reflect that difficult emotions can lead to avoidance and the 'invisibility' of the child (Ferguson 2016, 2017; Ferguson et al. 2022; Heron and Black 2023). In some studies reviewed, social workers used the emotions generated by a home visit to help make sense of an encounter. Feelings of confusion, suspicion, empathy, 'gut feelings' or 'bad vibes' helped draw their attention to pertinent information (Cook 2020; O'Connor and Leonard 2014). In relation to career stage, the capacity to acknowledge, discuss and use emotional responses to the work, described as using one's 'internal supervisor', was shown to develop with time in practice (O'Connor and Leonard 2014).

There was some evidence that good quality supervision improved social work practice. Bostock et al. (2019) found that systematically informed supervision was associated with improved direct practice with children and families, in terms of both relationships building and 'good authority' skills. Systemic supervision was associated with more space for reflexivity and encouraged multiple perspectives and use of hypothesizing about what might be happening within a family (Bostock et al. 2019; Bostock et al. 2022).

4 | Discussion

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister 2022) recognized that positive change for children is dependent on a highly skilled workforce. Developing the requisite knowledge and skills in the early years post-qualifying is clearly essential for the professional development of ECSWs and dependent on an understanding of what effective social work looks like. To support this understanding, the current review aimed to assess the available literature on what knowledge and skills ECSWs need to practice effectively with children and families.

However, the effectiveness base is limited. Bar two notable exceptions (Forrester et al. 2018, 2019), no studies attempted to measure the impact of social worker knowledge and skills on

family outcomes. Critically, the literature is not segmented by career stage, meaning that this evidence review cannot provide a definitive answer to the question of what knowledge and skills ECSWs require to practice effectively with children and families. Given that ECSWs often report feeling inadequately prepared for practice when they transition from student to social worker (Scourfield et al. 2021), this represents a significant gap in our understanding of what ECSWs need to deepen their knowledge and build their expertise in what is a pivotal period of their professional development.

Nonetheless, the evidence review did provide some key pointers as to what knowledge and skills are required for effective child and family social work practice. A significant body of knowledge privileged the importance of communication skills and building relational capacity with children and families (see Ferguson 2016; Handley and Doyle 2014; Whincup 2017; Ruch et al. 2017; Winter 2017). However, no previous study has attempted to synthesize this evidence in one place, with attention paid to 'live' examples of practice to support development of ECSW knowledge and skills. Given that Forrester et al. (2019) found strong associations between social worker relationship building and good authority skills for some parental outcomes, this provided a useful analytic framework for synthesizing findings in line with best evidence available.

The review adds weight to what Ferguson (2016, 283) describes as 'performing child protection work' or what child and family social workers do in their everyday practice to effect change for children. It reinforces the importance of microencounters where skilled social workers build trusting relationships through their interactions, paying attention to small gestures such as tea making for parents or messy play with younger children. That and a willingness to accord 'epistemic authority' to the testimony of service users regarding their own lives and experiences, while providing clear and honest information about the reasons for social work involvement (Bostock and Koprowska 2022). These encounters are the 'invisible trade' of social work (Pithouse 2019) that for ECSWs may be opaque or expected to 'learn by stealth' (Davidson and Darracott 2024, 1340).

Unsurprisingly, the review identified effective partnership working as critical for identifying and protecting children at risk of harm (Davidson et al. 2012; Heron and Black 2023; Kettle 2018). This aspect of performing child protection social work may be more visible to ECSWs through participation and observation in more public forums, such as multiagency meetings. However, mastering the complexities of negotiation with other agencies is likely to be fraught with performance anxiety regarding credibility and confidence to influence partnership working. This may be particularly challenging for ECSWs when tensions between agencies need to be surfaced and addressed (Kettle 2018).

Interestingly, there were hints within the literature that the capacity to notice, explore and use emotional responses to the work developed with time in practice (O'Connor and Leonard 2014). This of course makes sense, but since the evidence base rarely paid attention to the impact of career stage on knowledge and skills, it is worth highlighting that reflexivity takes time to develop. One correlation study that rated the quality of supervision and direct practice demonstrated that the quality of supervision

was strongly associated with improved quality of practice with children and families, both in terms of relationship building and good authority skills (Bostock et al. 2019). While widely recognizing that ECSWs require safe and supportive supervision, the wider ASYE literature suggests that this is not necessarily experienced (Scourfield et al. 2021). In part, this may reflect that supervisors themselves feel ill-prepared to supervise ASYEs and support them develop their expertise (Smith et al. 2023).

Beyond limitations in the evidence base on what knowledge and skills, ECSWs need to practice effectively, and there are some notable gaps in the evidence base regarding outcomes for children and young people. While Forrester et al. (2018, 2019) do explore the impact of social work practice on outcomes for parents, no study was identified that attempted to measure the impact of social worker knowledge and skills on outcomes for children. Given that the review highlights differences in practice skills by age group, any future research in this area could usefully differentiate by age as well as children's needs to understand what works to improve outcomes.

5 | Conclusions

Had the current evidence review has been conducted in line with systematic review standards, we would have to conclude that there is no evidence to support the effectiveness of ECSW knowledge and skills on outcomes for children and families. We would argue, however, that this review contributes to what is currently known to be effective, drawing on practice-near descriptions of what works to support ECSWs build their expertise in child safeguarding. While our findings may seem obvious, the skills demonstrated require deliberate effort, practice, attention development and support to hone. Furthermore, the associated knowledge acquisition requires a dedicated commitment to critical thinking, openness to learning and curiosity to ensure evidence is constantly updated. ECSWs are expected to learn fast, moving away from doing tasks to performing practice. In what can be a turbulent period of professional development, it is essential that early career support focuses not just on competence but supporting ECSWs build their confidence to be a social worker equipped to effectively perform child protection work with children and families.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.