

Building trust with children and parents in the social work context: A scoping review

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Abstract

In this scoping review, we attempt to identify the consequences of trust in the relationship between professionals and clients (children and parents), elaborating upon how social work contextualizes the trust-building process and how professionals can build trust with clients. We first performed a literature search in March and April 2024, resulting in a total of 2,600 hits. After applying the exclusion criteria, we selected thirty-six peer-reviewed research articles published between 2014 and 2024 for our analysis. According to our review, trust enables a partnership between clients and professionals, and at best can support client healing as well as a generalized sense of trust. However, social work is a challenging context for the trust-building process given the power imbalance between clients and professionals, the high turnover of professionals, the complex service needs of clients, and structural problems within the system. Professionals can build trust with clients through different acts of care, using a strength-based approach, providing time and continuity, and working with families' wider networks.

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Introduction

Trust is an important factor for relationships on various levels, whether it is trust between individuals or an individual's trust in institutions. Many studies indicate that trust is beneficial to democracy, the economy, and the social sphere (Seligman 2000; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005).

A common definition of trust is the expectation that another person or institution (object of trust) will not intentionally harm the trusting individual and will act in the trusting individual's best interest (Offe 1999). Moreover, trust is typically categorized according to different forms. First, interpersonal trust exists between individuals, which can be *particularized trust* when individuals know each other or *generalized trust*, meaning that trust extends to strangers. Moreover, trust in institutions is defined as *confidence* (Luhmann 1979; Seligman 2000). Different types of trust are known to interlink with one another, because generalized trust and confidence in institutions often exist at similar levels, thereby strengthening or weakening one another (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005; Kouvo 2011).

In the Nordic countries, population-level confidence in government (Palmisano and Sacchi 2024), in social and healthcare services (OECD 2021), and in child welfare services (Skivenes and Benbenishty 2022) has remained high. Interestingly, a high level of confidence is often associated with a low level of income inequality within the population (Palmisano and Sacchi 2024). Moreover, the Nordic countries are also categorized as having family-oriented child welfare systems, featuring the availability of broad support for the child and family through various services, wherein risk-oriented systems focus on protecting children from serious harm (Gilbert et al. 2011). The institutional context often affects the confidence level in child welfare services such that confidence is lower in risk-oriented systems and comparatively higher in family service-oriented systems (Loen and Skivenez 2023).

Notably, trust always contains the vulnerability of the person who trusts (Ma et al. 2019). The context of social work challenges building trust because the relationship between the social worker and the client is asymmetrical, with the social worker having more power than the client, thereby highlighting the client's vulnerability (Heino et al. 2024). Thus, in asymmetrical relationships, mistrust may appear a reasonable course of action to reduce one's own vulnerability (Scheman 2020).

Regardless of the importance of trust in social work, to our knowledge, no review has been conducted to elaborate upon trust in the context of social work with children and parents. According to [Soukiala and Pietilä \(2024\)](#), trust is often taken for granted in social work and thus remains undefined and unanalysed in empirical studies. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap by completing a scoping review of previous peer-reviewed studies to assess existing knowledge about trust in social work with children and parents.

Research on trust between clients and professionals in social work

Previous research has shown that trust is essential to cooperation between social workers or other professionals, parents, and children. [Mirick \(2014\)](#) conducted a study involving parents engaged with child welfare services, finding that parental mistrust and reluctance significantly influenced the relationship with social workers and the outcome of cooperation. In a previous study on trust in child welfare services ([Heino and Jaakola 2025](#)), social workers described trust as a crucial factor enabling cooperation between parents and social workers. However, social workers indicated that building trust with parents is a demanding task, particularly when parental trust in social workers and the obligation of social workers to act in the best interest of the child may conflict with one another. Studies also suggest that parents' traumatic experiences in personal relationships and in interactions with authorities may lead to feelings of insecurity, thereby negatively impacting parents' trust in social workers ([Stephens 2018](#); [Shemmings et al. 2012](#); [Mason et al. 2020](#)).

In addition, research regarding migrant parents indicates that there is a lack of trust in social work and child welfare services (see, e.g. [Handulle and Vassenden 2021](#); [Tembo et al. 2021](#)). Such distrust might result from a fear of facing racial prejudice, as well as the perception of child welfare services as primarily controlling institutions. Similar results have been observed in studies concerning Indigenous and racialized parents (see, e.g. [Kelly and Varghese 2018](#); [Keddell and Hyslop 2019](#)).

According to previous studies ([Pinkney 2013](#); [Davies 2019](#); [Heino et al. 2024](#)), building trust with children requires continuity in the relationship between a child and a professional, along with active listening and transparency about interventions and children's rights from the professional. Thus, the trust-building process is simultaneously hampered by constraints such as social workers' limited time and heavy caseloads.

Methods and data

In this scoping review, we aimed to explore the scope and nature of the existing research (Arksey and O'Malley 2005). First, we posed three research questions addressing trust in social work:

- What are the consequences of trust in the relationship between professionals and clients in social work with children and parents?
- In what ways does social work contextualize the trust-building process?
- How can professionals build trust with children and parents?

To address these questions, we began searching for studies, which we will describe in further detail in the sections that follow. Here, we use the concept *professionals* and not social workers, since many of the studies used this specific concept and focused on other professionals beyond social workers.

We performed a scoping review in March and April 2024 through an electronic search in the EBSCOhost database, including both sociology and psychology databases CINAHL, SocINDEX of Full Text, Academic Search Complete, eBook, eBook Academic, and eBook Open Access Collections (EBSCOhost) entries. The search included the terms 'trust' AND 'social work' AND/OR 'social worker', and targeted peer-reviewed articles published in English. We restricted the initial search to manuscripts published between 2010 and 2024. After removing duplicates, the remaining studies were further limited to publications from 2014 to 2024, given that we aimed to analyse the most recent studies. In the next stage, studies were screened based on our exclusion criteria, detailed in Table 1, which provides an overview of the entire data selection process.

Data analysis

Following data selection, we created a table containing information about the study and its results. The first and second authors read all of the articles and completed the table. Subsequently, authors three, four, five, six, and seven read 3–5 designated articles each and entered their observations into the table. Thus, all articles were read by at least three co-authors.

Our analysis employed thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2022). The first author used coding to create preliminary themes guided by the three research questions. After a preliminary analysis, the first author labelled the first theme *consequences of trust in the*

Table 1. Overview of the data selection process.

Stage of selection process and exclusion criteria	Studies included
Studies identified through database search	2,600
Duplicates discarded	1,997
Limited to publications from 2010 to 2024 and then 2014 to 2024	732
Exclusion criteria	
(1) Fell below the threshold for the quantitative repetition of concepts (both social work and trust appeared in the text five times)	204
(2) Trust explicitly in social work was not mentioned	78
(3) Trust in social work with clients/service users was not mentioned	50
(4) Did not focus on social work with children and parents	39
Total	36

relationship between clients and social workers, illustrating why trust is important for relationships between clients and professionals. The second theme was labelled *social work as a context for building trust*, concentrating on the ways in which child welfare as an institution influences the trust-building process. The final theme focused on the *ways in which social workers can establish trust*, including practical implications.

These initial themes were discussed and modified in a workshop attended by all of the co-authors. In the final stage, a synthesis of results was compiled and summarized by the first author, with all co-authors providing written comments on the manuscript.

Description of the data

Of the thirty-six peer-reviewed studies selected, nine were from the UK (Great Britain or Northern Ireland), five from the USA, four from Sweden, three from Italy, and two each from Denmark, Israel, and Norway, respectively, with one study each from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Estonia, New Zealand, and Switzerland. Three studies involved collaboration between researchers from different countries.

From these thirty-six studies, two were literature reviews and thirty-four presented empirical findings. Among these, two studies utilized quantitative methods, while twenty articles were qualitative studies. In addition, three studies applied mixed methods, and nine employed multi-method approaches using more than one qualitative dataset.

Among the studies, twenty-three focused on child protection, child welfare services, or foster/institutional care; three articles addressed school social work; and ten focused on social work in general. The question of respondents' racial or ethnic background was addressed in only five studies.

A total of sixteen studies focused on children and youth, six studies on professionals, five studies on parents, two studies consisted of literature reviews, and one study was classified as an ethnographic study relying on the researcher's field notes. Finally, six studies examined multiple

groups simultaneously, including children, parents, professionals, foster parents, and other stakeholders. Detailed information on the included studies is presented in [Table 2](#).

Results

This review focuses on trust in previous studies, and our preliminary aim was to include conceptual discussions on trust in our analysis. However, only fourteen articles included a clear definition of the concept of trust. In those studies, trust was described as the feeling of being safe with another person (Lefevre et al. 2017; Swan et al. 2018; Sinai-Glazer 2020) and as a belief in another's goodwill (Meysen and Kelly 2018). Trust was also associated with reliability, whereby trust constitutes a positive presumption about what to expect from another person (Meysen and Kelly 2018; Petrocchi et al. 2018; Nissen and Engen 2021), while mistrust stems from negative presumptions (Deane et al. 2018; Van Haute et al. 2018; Kokaliari et al. 2019; Haight et al. 2020; Soffer-Elnekave et al. 2020; Bacon et al. 2023). Trust was also described as a choice (Warming 2019) involving vulnerability by relying on another person (Nissen and Engen 2021; Saar-Heiman and Krumer-Nevo 2021).

In twenty-three articles, trust was not clearly defined but was discussed in parallel with other concepts, such as reciprocity, empathy, or the quality of the relationship between the client and the social worker. These studies presented results concerning the consequences of trust in relationships without a clear definition of trust itself. All of the articles included discussions about how trust in a social work setting could be built, approaching it as an outcome of the process. One of the primary results of this study is that previous research indicated that trust is crucial for relationships between professionals and clients. However, trust appears to be considered a self-evident phenomenon in social work practice and research, resulting in a lack of empirical studies focusing explicitly on trust and its practical definitions.

The consequences of trust in the relationship between clients and professionals

Enabling partnership between clients and professionals

According to our analysis, trust is essential to cooperation between clients and professionals. It enables partnership (Coogle and Hanline 2016; Arbeiter and Toros 2017; Bekaert 2021) and fosters positive relationships (Holland 2014) between professionals and family members. In practice, client trust is essential for professionals in order to acquire

Table 2. Overview of the included studies.

Author(s) (year), name of the study (most recent to least recent)	Method and data	Perspective and social work area	Country
Bacon et al. (2023), 'At the Edge of Care: A Systematic Review and Thematic Synthesis of Parent and Practitioner Views and Experiences of Support for Parents with Mental Health Needs and Children's Social Service Involvement'	Systematic literature review Forty-one studies	Previous studies/ child welfare	Germany
Kjelgren, Lilliehörn, and Markström (2023), 'School Social Work in Sweden—Who Are the Children in Counseling, and What Support Are They Offered? A Protocol Study About Individual Counselling in Elementary Schools'	Mixed methods Twenty social workers, 193 protocols based on individual sessions	Social workers/school social work	Sweden
Pfiffner, Windlinger, and Hostettler (2023), 'When Do Pupils Talk About Their Problems? Explaining Pupils' Intentions to Seek Help from School Social Work Services'	Quantitative 4420 survey responses from children aged 11–16 years	Children/school so- cial work	Switzerland
Rice, Mullineux, and Killick (2022), 'Female Care Leavers' Experience of the Staff–Child Relationship While Living in an Intensive Support Children's Home in Northern Ireland'	Multi-method Literature review and five semi-structured interviews with female care leavers over 18 years old	Previous studies and youth/foster care	UK (Northern Ireland)
Sprecher et al. (2022), '"Trust me, we can sort this out!": A Theory-Testing Case Study of the Role of Epistemic Trust in Fostering Relationships'	Qualitative Case study, four semi-structured interviews with a foster carer and a young person in their care	Child living in foster care and foster parent/foster care	Great Britain
Nissen and Engen (2021), 'Power and Care in Statutory Social Work with Vulnerable Families'	Qualitative Case study, interviews with a mother and a social worker	Mother and social worker/ child welfare	Denmark
Saar-Heiman and Krumer-Nevo (2021), 'Redistribution and Recognition in Social Work Practice: Lessons Learned from Providing Material Assistance in Child Protection Settings'	Qualitative Twenty interviews with so- cial workers	Social workers/ child protection	Israel
Gorin et al. (2021) '"She made you feel like there's hope": Gaining a Better Understanding of How Children Negotiate Their Relationships with Social Workers from Their Own Accounts'	Qualitative Interviews with 100 children aged 6–18 years	Children/ child protection	Great Britain

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Author(s) (year), name of the study (most recent to least recent)	Method and data	Perspective and social work area	Country
Bekaert et al. (2021), 'Family Members' Perspectives of Child Protection Services: A Meta-synthesis of the Literature'	Literature review Thirty-five studies	Previous studies/ child welfare	Great Britain, France, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Poland Israel
Sinai-Glazer (2020), 'The Essentials of the Helping Relationship Between Social Workers and Clients'	Multi-method Interviews with fourteen social workers and twenty mothers, participant observations	Mothers and social workers/ child welfare	USA
Haight et al. (2020), 'The Center for Regional and Tribal Child Welfare Studies: Systems Change Through a Relational Anishinaabe Worldview'	Qualitative Thirteen interviews with tribal elders, centre administrators, educators, researchers, former MSW students, and a judge	Multi-perspective/ child welfare and Indigenous social work	USA
Ellem et al. (2020) 'Transcending the Professional-Client Divide: Supporting Young People with Complex Support Needs Through Transitions'	Multi-method Interviews with thirty-eight young people aged 16-26 years, art-based methods	Youth/social work	Australia
Soffer-Elnekave, Haight, and Jader (2020), 'Parent Mentoring Relationships as a Vehicle for Reducing Racial Disparities: Experiences of Child Welfare-Involved Parents, Mentors, and Professionals'	Multi-method Fifteen interviews with parent mentors, parents, and stakeholders, participant observations, and document reviews	Multi-perspective/ child welfare and racial disparities	USA
Sapiro (2020), 'Assessing Trustworthiness: Marginalized Youth and the Central Relational Paradox in Treatment'	Qualitative Interviews with thirteen young women, re-interviewed 11, aged 17-20 years	Youth/social work	Denmark
Källström and Thunberg (2019), '"Like an equal, somehow": What Young People Exposed to Family Violence Value in Counseling'	Qualitative Four interviews with young people aged 12-19 years	Youth/social work	Sweden

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Author(s) (year), name of the study (most recent to least recent)	Method and data	Perspective and social work area	Country
Warming (2019), 'Trust and Power Dynamics in Children's Lived Citizenship and Participation: The Case of Public Schools and Social Work in Denmark'	Mixed methods Ten workshops and individual interviews with children/youth aged 7–17 and a survey with 582 responses from children aged 12–14 years	Children and youth/school social work	USA
Kokaliari, Roy, and Taylor (2019), 'African American Perspectives on Racial Disparities in Child Removals'	Qualitative Twenty-one interviews	African American parents/child welfare services	USA
Robbins and Cook (2018), "'Don't even get us started on social workers'": Domestic Violence, Social Work and Trust—An Anecdote from Research'	Qualitative Focus group discussions with twenty-six women	Mothers/child welfare	Great Britain
Meysen and Kelly (2018), 'Child Protection Systems Between Professional Cooperation and Trustful Relationships: A Comparison of Professional Practical and Ethical Dilemmas in England/Wales, Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia'	Qualitative Eight workshops with seventy-five professionals from four different countries	Stakeholders and professionals/child protection	Great Britain, Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia
Husby, Slettebø, and Juul (2018), 'Partnerships with Children in Child Welfare: The Importance of Trust and Pedagogical Support'	Qualitative Ten interviews with children aged 9–17 years	Children/child protection	Norway
Petrocchi et al. (2018), 'Children's Trust in Social Workers: Scale Development and Relations to Children's Engagement with Social Workers'	Quantitative 112 children aged 8–14 years	Children/social work	Italy
Swan, Holt, and Kirwan (2018), "'Who do I turn to if something really bad happens?": Key Working and Relationship-based Practice in Residential Child Care'	Qualitative Interviews with ten care leavers aged 18–24 years	Youth/residential child care	Ireland

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Author(s) (year), name of the study (most recent to least recent)	Method and data	Perspective and social work area	Country
Van Haute et al. (2018), 'Managing the Flow of Private Information on Children and Parents in Poverty Situations: Creating a Panoptic Eye in Interorganizational Networks?'	Multi-method Twenty-one observations, forty-six interviews, and two focus groups	Social workers and steering group members/child and family social work	Belgium
Deane et al. (2018), 'Live-In Family Enhancement (LIFE): A Comprehensive Program for Healing and Family Reunification'	Multi-method Document reviews of ten families, interviews with eight families Mixed methods Survey with 204 participants and 14 interviews	Professionals and child welfare	Canada
Lefevre et al. (2017), 'Building Trust with Children and Young People At-Risk of Child Sexual Exploitation: The Professional Challenge'	Qualitative Fifty-three children aged 11–19 years interviewed three times	Social workers and other professionals/ social work	Great Britain
Lindahl and Bruhn (2017) 'Foster Children's Experiences and Expectations Concerning the Child-Welfare Officer Role: Prerequisites and Obstacles for Close and Trustful Relationships'	Qualitative Five interviews with children aged 13–16 years	Children/foster care	Sweden
Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen (2017), 'Service User Participation in Interprofessional Teams in Child Welfare in Norway: Vulnerable Adolescents' Perceptions'	Qualitative Interviews with eleven child protection workers, eleven parents, and eleven children aged 7–15 years	Children/child welfare	Norway
Arbeiter and Toros (2017), 'Participatory Discourse: Engagement in the Context of Child Protection Assessment Practices from the Perspectives of Child Protection Workers, Parents, and Children'	Qualitative Fourteen interviews with young people aged 17–22 years	Professionals including social workers, parents, and children/child welfare	Estonia
Abel and Wahab (2017) "'Build a friendship with them": The Discourse of "At-Risk" as a Barrier to Relationship Building Between Young People Who Trade Sex and Social Workers'	Qualitative Twenty-six children aged 6–17 years	Youth/child welfare services	New Zealand
Cossar, Brandon, and Jordan (2016) "'You've got to trust her and she's got to trust you": Children's Views on Participation in the Child Protection System'	Qualitative Multi-method observations, interviews, and progress summaries of five mothers	Children/child welfare	Great Britain
Google and Hanline (2016) 'An Exploratory Study of Family-Centered Help-Giving Practices in Early Intervention: Families of Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder'		Mothers/social work	USA

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Author(s) (year), name of the study (most recent to least recent)	Method and data	Perspective and social work area	Country
Franks, Hunwicks, and Goswami (2015), 'Barriers to the Uptake of Emergency Accommodation by Young Runaways and Thrown-out Children and the Role of the "Transitional Person"'	Multi-method previous studies, face-to-face interviews, and focus group discussions with forty young people	Previous studies and youth/social work	Great Britain
Skoog, Khoo, and Nygren (2015), 'Disconnection and Dislocation: Relationships and Belonging in Unstable Foster and Institutional Care'	Qualitative Twelve interviews with children aged 8–19 years in Swedish foster and institutional care	Children/foster care and institutional care	Sweden
Holland (2014), 'Trust in the Community: Understanding the Relationship Between Formal, Semi-Formal, and Informal Child Safeguarding in a Local Neighborhood'	Multi-method Case study, field notes, formally and informally interviewed at least forty-five adult and child residents and thirty community and statutory workers. Age of residents involved ranged from three to over eighty	Multi-perspective with children, parents, and young adults/child welfare	Great Britain USA
Broadhurst and Mason (2014), 'Social Work Beyond the VDU: Foregrounding Co-Presence in Situated Practice: Why Face-to-Face Practice Matters'	Qualitative Conceptual and ethnographic field notes, and illustrative case studies	Multi-perspective/child welfare, social work	Great Britain
Lindsay et al. (2014), 'Social Workers as "Cultural Brokers" in Providing Culturally Sensitive Care to Immigrant Families Raising a Child with a Physical Disability'	Qualitative Forty-five interviews with professionals	Professionals, including social workers/social work	Canada

valid information about a family's situation and provide suitable support to them (Meysen and Kelly 2018).

Trust from children and young people in professionals is presented in studies as crucial to enabling children to contact professionals, such as school counsellors (Kjellgren et al. 2023; Pfiffner et al. 2023) or social workers and foster care workers (Swan et al. 2018) during crises. Trust from children is also necessary for them to openly describe their situations and feelings (Cossar et al. 2016; Husby et al. 2018), engage and participate in decision-making in their own cases (Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen 2017; Rotenberg et al. 2018), and address risky behaviours and relationships (Lefevre et al. 2017). Mistrust towards professionals, however, leads to non-engagement and the withholding of information (Skoog et al. 2015; Abel and Wahab 2017).

Trust is also described as an essential factor for parents to be open and honest about situations affecting the everyday life of a family (Sinai-Glazer 2020). Conversely, parental mistrust leads to disengagement and resistance to cooperation with professionals (Deane et al. 2018; Van Haute et al. 2018; Kokaliari et al. 2019; Haight et al. 2020; Soffer-Elnekave et al. 2020; Bacon et al. 2023).

Healing and promoting trust in others

In most studies, social work was described as a relationship-based practice, where trusting relationships with professionals serve as reparative acts, supporting client healing from traumatic experiences. Cossar et al. (2016) suggest that trusting relationships with professionals can promote children's feelings of safety with professionals and other people in general. Other studies (Swan et al. 2018; Ellem et al. 2020) argue that trust in professionals can help children recover from psychological distress and rebuild trust in others following early interactions in which they were not safe and which did not promote trust.

At best, the relationship between children and professionals can be healing, given that it can reduce so-called fear-based and defensive practices, such as viewing professionals as threats and avoiding or resisting them (Rice et al. 2022). The relationship can also help to build a secure base and model for future relationships with professionals (Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen 2017) and people in general (Swan et al. 2018; Källström and Thunberg 2019; Sprecher 2022).

Social work as a context for building trust

Power imbalance between clients and professionals

On some level, all of the studies addressed the fact that the relationship between service users and professionals is heavily contextualized by

social work as an institution. This indicates that, although encounters occur between individuals, professionals represent their agency and professional role, resulting in an asymmetrical relationship between social workers and families. In total, twenty-four studies explicitly discussed power imbalances and tensions between support and control.

The power imbalance between parents and professionals was evident during the assessment of a child's situation, leading parents to feel that they do not have the right to define their circumstances themselves (Nissen and Engen 2021; Bacon et al. 2023). Specifically, when focusing on the risk assessment, parents often struggle to identify their possibilities and strengths, potentially resulting in feelings of powerlessness (Kokaliari et al. 2019; Bekaert et al. 2021; Nissen and Engen 2021; Bacon et al. 2023). Such power imbalances frequently lead parents to fear that their children would be taken into care (Robbins and Cook 2018; Bekaert et al. 2021) and that they themselves would face punitive measures (Arbeiter and Toros 2017). Thus, underlying power imbalances create conflicts (Nissen and Engen 2021), given that it is not easy to accept support from individuals who possess a greater degree of power in a relationship (Robbins and Cook 2018; Saar-Heiman and Krumer-Nevo 2021).

In studies focusing on children and youth, participants raised concerns about confidentiality and mandated reporting by social workers to other officials. In practice, this means that it is difficult for children to trust social workers and other professionals when there is a possibility that all of the information will be disclosed (Abel and Wahab 2017; Petrocchi et al. 2018; Sapiro 2020). In addition, this power asymmetry, combined with a lack of valid information about available support, can lead to fears, a distrust of social work, and resistance to accepting help (Franks et al. 2015).

Two of the articles discussed trust and social work or child welfare with Indigenous families, two with African American families, and one with migrant families. According to studies focusing on Indigenous and African American families, a history of colonialism and oppression, replacing Indigenous systems and parenting role models, slavery, racism, and intergenerational trauma, combined with the controlling and punitive nature of child welfare resulted in a deep distrust of institutions (Deane et al. 2018; Kokaliari et al. 2019; Haight et al. 2020; Soffer-Elnekave et al. 2020). A study focusing on social work with migrant families highlighted that the social work profession is based on Western or Anglo-American values, where alternative perspectives are not always heard or valued, possibly hindering trust-building (Lindsay et al. 2014).

Turnover of professionals and clients' need for stability

The continuity of relationships between professionals and clients was described as crucial to the trust-building process with parents as well as

with children, because trust requires time to get to know one another (Lefevre et al. 2017; Kokaliari et al. 2019; et al. Sinai-Glazer 2020; Rice et al. 2022).

The turnover of professionals was discussed as a phenomenon greatly hampering the trust-building process, especially with children. A frequent change in social workers meant that children had to repeat painful experiences with a new person (Gorin et al. 2021). A high turnover of professionals also resulted in a sense of abandonment among children, not only because of the change itself, but also because children are rarely informed about that change (Bekaert et al. 2021). Swan et al. (2018) as well as Skoog et al. (2015) found that the continuity of a relationship with a professional provides at best a chance to build a secure base, which is particularly important for children with adverse childhood experiences and disrupted relationships.

Complex service needs of parents and children and structural problems in the system

In various studies, social work was described as a challenging context for trust-building due to the complex service needs of clients and the structural problems of the system itself. The complex service needs of children were related to instability in their previous relationships and a child's permanent sense of insecurity, which caused difficulties vis-à-vis trusting professionals (Rice et al. 2022). An insecurity in attachment was often related to other adverse experiences, such as parental abuse, neglect, and mental health problems (Skoog et al. 2015; Lefevre et al. 2017). In addition, some parents experienced their own childhood traumas, physical health and mental health issues, and poverty, all of which increased a general distrust in the system (Kokaliari et al. 2019).

Studies also showed that professionals had experiences of being restricted by a system that offered fragmented services, was underfunded, crisis- and risk-driven, and inflexible (Bacon et al. 2023). Other recognized challenges across different countries included high caseloads among professionals (Skoog et al. 2015; Arbeiter and Toros 2017; Lindahl and Bruhn 2017; Bacon et al. 2023). For instance, Maysen and Kelly (2018) noted the pressure professionals face due to insufficient resources while working in complex family situations, where predicting outcomes can be difficult. In addition, Lefevre et al. (2017) highlighted that, for professionals to build trust with their clients, smaller caseloads, time to create a safe environment, regular reflective supervision, informal workplace support, and training on interaction skills are necessary.

Compassion and human connection were recognized as a core social work value (Rice et al. 2022), meaning that there is a huge difference between risk-averse child protection and support-oriented child welfare

(Meysen and Kelly 2018). When a professional's job is to manage risk, they become case managers who privilege information over affect, rendering building trust difficult if not impossible (Broadhurst and Mason 2014; Cossar et al. 2016).

Ways for professionals to build trust

Acts of care

Several ways professionals can build trust were identified and named across the studies we analysed. *Active listening* was described as an act by professionals which mirrored their genuine interest in what a parent or child had to say. Listening based on wonder and with the aim of including alternative perceptions of reality in the conversation were described as important, resulting in a sense of recognition of parents and a shared understanding of the situation, which made possible both goal setting for change work and reducing power imbalances between professionals and parents (Coogle and Hanline 2016; Arbeiter and Toros 2017; Sinai-Glazer 2020; Bekaert et al. 2021; Nissen and Engen 2021).

Active listening was described as important in order for children to feel able to participate in the discussion about their own situation and to reflect on their thoughts and feelings (Franks et al. 2015; Skoog et al. 2015; Cossar et al. 2017; Lefevre et al. 2017; Källström and Thunberg 2019). Active listening requires a professional to remain attuned to the interaction and to not treat children as sources of information. In practice, active listening includes maintaining eye-contact and concentrating on nonverbal communication, showing empathy, recognition, and respect for the child and their accounts (Broadhurst and Mason 2014; Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen 2017), as well as asking appropriate questions and devoting one's full attention to an interaction by not reading papers or taking notes while talking (Franks et al. 2015; Gorin et al. 2021).

In addition to active listening, *reciprocity* was mentioned most often as a way for a professional to build trust, especially with children. Thus, trust itself needs to be reciprocal and a professional's trust in a child was presented as a form of support (Cossar et al. 2016; Arbeiter and Toros 2017; Warming 2019; Kjellgren et al. 2023). Demonstrating reciprocity to a child meant that a professional showed that being with a child was not simply their work and could take the shape of sharing some personal details with that child (Skoog et al. 2015; Swan et al. 2018; Sapiro 2020; Bakaert 2021; Rice et al. 2022). As one child expressed in the study by Husby et al. (2018), 'How can I trust a person I do not know anything about?' Personalizing the professional-client relationship and being authentic were described as acts of care on the professional's part, which

also decreased power asymmetries, rendering the relationship more equal (Lindahl and Bruhn 2017; Källström and Thunberg 2019).

In addition, other *concrete small acts of care* were discussed. Doing something extra based on the willingness of a professional, such as engaging in playful activities with children (Gorin et al. 2021), bringing pastries or cookies to a meeting, or meeting outside an official context, was important to both parents (Sinai-Glazer 2020) and children (Lindahl and Bruhn 2017). Honesty, transparency, and making sure a child understands information were also described as acts of caring from professionals (Skoog et al. 2015; Cossar et al. 2016; Lefevre et al. 2017; Husby et al. 2018; Sapiro 2020; Gorin et al. 2021).

As previously discussed, the field of child welfare presents significant challenges for the development of trust between children and professionals. These challenges are further intensified in situations where professionals are required to exercise authority and take actions that may conflict with the child's expressed wishes. In such instances, it is essential that professionals engage in open and transparent communication regarding the rationale behind their decisions and interventions, as well as provide clear information about forthcoming steps (Gorin et al. 2021). Ensuring that children feel heard and cared for by professionals—regardless of the outcomes—is equally important for fostering a sense of trust and relational safety (Källström and Thunberg 2019; Warming 2019; Sapiro 2020; Gorin et al. 2021).

Strengths-based approach

A strengths-based approach was widely discussed in the studies from the perspectives of parents as well as children and presented in opposition to a risk-focused approach. If professionals concentrated on risks, parents lost confidence in their own abilities to care for their children (Bacon et al. 2023). Encouragement, which focused on family members' competence and recognized family members' strengths, was described as increasing parents' trust in professionals (Coogle and Hanline 2016; Bekaert et al. 2021). For children, a strengths-based approach increased their sense of autonomy (Abel and Wahab 2017) and led to their concrete participation in decisions impacting their own lives (Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen 2017; Warming 2019).

In addition, a non-judgemental attitude was represented as part of a strengths-based approach, especially in social work with children (Franks et al. 2015; Arbeiter and Toros 2017; Pfiffner et al. 2023). In practice, this meant not automatically beginning a relationship by assessing risks, but listening (Warming 2019), attending to strengths and capabilities (Abel and Wahab 2017), showing genuine interest in what a child has to say, validating a child's accounts, and checking whether a professional's own interpretations are correct (Sapiro 2020). In the case of migrant

(Lindsay et al. 2014) and Indigenous (Haight et al. 2020; Soffer-Elnekave 2020) families, an important element of care was also respectfully discussing families' cultural beliefs and strengths based on the family's background and being aware of one's biases as a professional.

Time and continuity

Time and continuity were also described as crucial factors affecting the trust-building process between professionals and families. Time referred to allowing sufficient time for communication during specific meetings, enabling family members to express their views (Arbeiter and Toros 2017; Bekaert et al. 2021) and without feeling rushed (Lefevre et al. 2017). In addition, time was important for the trust-building process for family members so that they could believe that social workers' intentions are good (Van Haute 2018; Sinai-Glazer 2020), which requires regular communication (Skoog et al. 2015; Bekaert 2021), the availability of a professional, and a continuity of relationships (Lindahl and Bruhn 2017; Swan et al. 2018; Sinai-Glazer 2020; Rice et al. 2022; Pfiffner et al. 2023).

For a relationship to become trusting between a child and professionals, it is important that the social worker gets to know the child, understands the child's thoughts and behaviours, and ensures that the child can be certain about the professionals' good intentions (Lefevre et al. 2017). Time will tell whether a professional is trustworthy (Lindahl and Bruhn 2017; Sæbjørnsen and Willumsen 2017). Thus, trust is not necessarily a linear process and can require a professional to try different approaches with a child; however, studies clearly demonstrate that children have a desire for connection, stability, and predictability in their relationships with professionals (Abel and Wahab 2017; Warming 2019; Sapiro 2020; Sprecher et al. 2022).

Working with wider support networks

Six studies explicitly suggested that to gain clients' trust, social workers should work with wider support networks, such as a third-party sector. As previously described, professionals and clients experience a power imbalance, which can hamper a client's trust. This power imbalance is not only related to the professional role and its legalistic power to implement interventions, but also to the presumption that social workers are often middle-class and privileged in many ways and alien to clients' experiences (Franks et al. 2015; Robbins and Cook 2018).

Thus, especially in the case of Indigenous and racialized families, a bridging role involving mentors from the same community as their clients was highlighted. Mentors provide families with practical and peer

support and can explain cultural and societal knowledge about client experiences and their everyday lives to professionals (Deane *et al.* 2018; Soffer-Elnekave *et al.* 2020; Haight *et al.* 2020). Thus, different practices and programmes positioned outside social work were presented, including linking tribal, county, and state systems aimed at strengthening families and communities (Deane *et al.* 2018; Haight *et al.* 2020; Soffer-Elnekave *et al.* 2020).

Discussion

This scoping review aimed to identify the role of trust in the relationship between social workers and clients to elaborate upon the ways in which social work contextualizes the trust-building process and to explore how social workers can build trust with their clients. The findings from this review contribute to the discussion of trust in social work in several ways, reinforcing the existing perception of the meaningfulness of trust in relationships between clients and social workers. We demonstrate that trust enables partnership between clients and professionals, and a trust-relationship can promote healing and trust in others.

In addition, special features of social work emerge in the context of the trust-building process. The first recognized feature is the power imbalance between clients and social workers. The dual role of social workers in providing support while simultaneously exercising control complicates the process of building trust, given that it is difficult for clients to be vulnerable when social work is perceived as a threat. The power imbalance is emphasized if the system is risk-oriented and punitive, amplifying the professionals' power and potentially leading to client resistance.

In addition, the turnover of professionals coupled with clients' need for stability was widely discussed across studies, specifically because the trust-building process requires time and familiarity, especially if clients' previous relationships were unstable. The complex service needs of parents and children and structural problems within the system were features of social work that were also discussed.

Several ways of building trust were identified in this study. These included acts of care, which were, on the one hand, quite simple, such as being an active listener, but, on the other hand, concerned professionals' willingness to cross professional boundaries and share some personal information with their clients. Notably, social workers are usually trained to not disclose personal information to clients. That said, doing so might be needed—especially when working with children—in order to establish trust. Other trust-building practices included a strengths-based approach, ensuring sufficient time and continuity, and working with wider networks.

Based on the results from this study, we argue that social workers need to prioritize relationship-building above all else, including beyond simple bureaucratic work and the obligation to follow organizational protocols and guidelines. Fundamentally, if there is no trust, it can be hard for clients to disclose personal information and commit to the relationship with the professional. A relationship-based practice and the trust-building process are time- and emotion-intensive, require engagement with children and parents, and do not align with an orientation towards risk management and efficiency. Thus, it is necessary to have social policies that allow professionals to use their time and efforts to establish relationships built on trust, feeling safe, listening, compassion, and availability.

Strengths and limitations of the study

This review benefited from the fact that seven people analysed the articles included in our study, limiting the possibility of biased interpretations. However, there are limitations to this study, which we must also address. The primary limitation of this study is that most of the articles did not focus specifically or solely on trust, and, in most studies, trust was not clearly defined. However, trust was discussed in all of the studies and its importance was recognized in social work with families.

Gaps in this area of research were also identified, including the fact that most studies on social work and trust were qualitative, which can help explain what is going on, but not the level of trust that children, their parents, or other stakeholders have towards social work on a societal level. Our findings indicate that future research in this area could benefit from examining trust using quantitative methods and focusing on population-level trust. It is also important to note that, although our search included studies from countries such as the USA, Australia, and New Zealand—contexts in which Indigenous children and families are disproportionately represented among disadvantaged populations and are more likely to come into contact with social work services compared with the majority population—only two studies were identified that explicitly addressed the theme of trust in relation to Indigenous families. Similarly, only two studies focused on trust among African American families, and just one examined this theme in relation to migrant families. These findings point to a significant gap in the literature and highlight the need for future research that explores the dynamics of trust-building with diverse population groups and minorities. Such research is essential for uncovering the various sociocultural, historical, and systemic factors that influence trust in social work relationships. Moreover, there is a pressing need for more nuanced research settings that explore how professionals can effectively build trust in contexts where children are

experiencing loyalty tensions with their parents or where professionals are obliged to report cases of child abuse or neglect. Such research should attend to the complexity of these circumstances, investigating the relational dynamics and ethical dilemmas inherent in balancing a child's need for emotional security with legal and professional responsibilities.

Conflicts of interest. None declared..

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Data availability

The data from this study consisted of published research articles, which are available via their respective journals. The list of articles appears in [Table 1](#).

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