Communication skills training helps improve how social work students interact with the people they safeguard and support.

Communication skills training, including empathy training, can help social work students to develop their communication skills. Opportunities to practise communication skills in a safe and supportive environment through role-play and/or simulation, with feedback and reflection, helps students to improve their skills. The effect of doing this training face-to-face, online or via blended learning is largely unknown.

What is this review about?
Good communication skills are important for social work practice and are commonly taught on social work qualifying courses. There is a range of different types of educational interventions, with wide variations in theoretical basis, approach, duration and mode of delivery. This systematic review looks at whether different interventions are effective in producing the following outcomes: social work students’ knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours.

What studies are included?
This review summarises quantitative data from randomised and non-randomised studies. The 15 studies included in this review were undertaken in Canada, Australia and North America. The research is very limited in terms of scope and quality, and there are important weaknesses in the evidence base.

Does communication skills training improve the communicative abilities of social work students?
Systematic communication skills training shows some promising effects in the development of social work students’ communicative abilities, especially in terms of their ability to demonstrate empathy and interviewing skills.
What do the findings of the review mean?
Communication is very important for social work practice, so we need to ensure that student social workers have opportunities to develop their communication skills.

Too few studies fully assessed student characteristics such as age, sex and ethnicity or took account of how previous experience, commitments and motivation affected students’ learning.

Consideration of stakeholder involvement and collaboration (such as by people with lived experience) was also lacking. Only the role of the educator was considered.

The studies were largely of poor quality and investigated many different implementation features, which made it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about what makes the teaching and learning of communication skills in social work education effective.

Researchers conducting studies into communication skills training should seek to carry out robust and rigorous outcomes-focused studies. They should also consider trying to see how and where these interventions might work, as well as understanding for whom they may be effective.