

Voice of the Child



Introduction

Effective safeguarding systems must be child centred. Responding to a child's lived experiences is fundamental to this task.

Problems can arise in safeguarding systems when practitioners in agencies lose sight of the needs and views of children or place the needs or interests of adults ahead of the children.

Everyone working with children and families must seek the voice of the child and reflect it in all aspects of work. This is rooted in legislation and good practice.

Core Practice Principles:

1. **Seeing and hearing the child** – using direct observation of babies and young children by a range of people and make sense of these observations in relation to risk factors; see children and young people away from their carers; see children in places where they feel safe or that is familiar to them
2. **Listening to adults who speak on behalf of the child** – routinely involve non-resident fathers in assessments; listen to other adults including teachers and grandparents
3. **Being alert to parents and carers who prevent access to the child** – ensure that respect for family privacy is not at the expense of safeguarding children
4. **Focusing on the child rather than the needs of parents and carers** – be alert to how a desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome difficulties can mask children's needs; recognise the specific needs of children who have caring responsibilities for their parents and carers; always consider the implications of domestic abuse for children
5. **Interpreting what children say in order to protect them** – ensure that actions take account of children's views; recognise behaviour as a means of communication; understand and respond to behavioural indicators of abuse; balance children's views with safeguarding their welfare

These principles are based on an Ofsted examination of Serious Case Reviews, 2011.

Voice of the Child

Professionals need to ensure the voice of the child runs through everything we do and that the child's perspective and lived experience is clearly visible in case notes, assessments and our planning, no matter what their age or ability to communicate directly.

Throughout the child's journey, there are several opportunities for their voice to be heard and recorded.

Each and every stage of the assessment and review process plays an important role for this to happen as they create new opportunities to have meaningful engagement with the child.

The voice of the child should be recorded within case notes, assessments, plans and all documents and exemplars in the electronic records.

Working Together to Safeguard Children (2013) states that:

'Children should to be seen and listened to and included throughout the assessment process. Their ways of communicating should be understood in the context of their family and community as well as their behaviour and developmental stage.' *'Children should be actively involved in all parts of the process based upon their age, developmental stage and identity. Direct work with the child and family should include observations of the interactions between the child and the parents/caregivers.'*

This is done by:

- ✓ Direct engagement – talking to the child
- ✓ Observation, particularly for young or non-verbal children – look at facial expressions and body language of the child.
- ✓ Observations such as pictures, photographs, playing role play and/or use of puppets can result in some good information about the child.
- ✓ Discussion with parents, family members, carers or agencies (but don't let this be your only perspective)
- ✓ Analysis of information held to consider what the impact might be on the child (test this out with the child)

It is important to keep records professional, fact based and respectful at all times, even where professional disagreements may exist.

Records form an important part of a child's Life Story and they should therefore be sensitively written in a way which is easy for the child to read and understand.

They are official records which may be used in court at any time and can also be accessed by the child from their 18th birthday.

Throughout the child's journey, there are several opportunities to record and review the child's voice and it is the Social Worker's responsibility to bring all this information together in order to achieve a meaningful analysis of the child/young person's views and feelings.

These include:

- The initial referral stage (if the child is the referrer)
- Single Assessment
- Section 47 enquiries
- ICPC conference
- CP, CIN and CIOC review meetings
- CP and CIOC planning meetings
- Direct work
- Social Worker visits
- Family Group Conferences
- Family Meetings
- Telephone calls
- Social Media
- Mind of My Own
- General feedback

Case Notes:

All children will be seen early in the assessment process and the case note ticked to evidence this.

Every time there is engagement with the child, notes should capture information about them, including observations of behaviours / interactions with parents and carers.

When direct work takes place where the child has written their own views or tools have been used which are handwritten or completed by the child, the social worker will upload this onto a child's file.

Case Note Summary:

The case note summary introduces the child/young person you are working with.

The record is for the child and a good case note summary confirms that you know them personally.

The initial pen portrait should be a single paragraph – a snapshot which brings the child to life – who are they, what are they like, where do they live and with, how do they communicate?

Case note summaries begin with the child's name, use words that would be used in a conversation and are personal to the child/young person.

Assessments:

Single Assessments will begin with a brief pen picture of the child/ren, in the 'reason for doing an assessment' section.

The child's voice will be captured throughout the assessment document and the child will be central to the assessment.

Plans:

Plans will be child centred, SMART and focused on meeting the child's needs and enhancing the capacity of parents or carers to meet those needs, where appropriate.

Reviews of the child's plan including CIN, CP and Children in Our Care:

There are often professionals involved in making decisions about children who have never met or seen them in person. It is therefore important that the detail in the assessment enables anyone reading the child's file to have a full and detailed understanding about them and their response to the situation they are in.

The child's views should leap off the page in all contact and, in particular the Social Work report to the review meeting, as this should provide a detailed lived experience of the child. This should be the same for every child and not just complex cases

Pre Court and Court Work:

Some casework will escalate to pre court and court. This will be an emotional time for the child and assumptions about their feelings and wishes should not be made as this may change during the process. Regularly reviewing the child's response is therefore good practice.

The Children Act 1989 states that a court shall have regard in particular to the "*ascertainable wishes and feelings of the child concerned (considered in the light of their age and understanding)*".

The SWET template will capture the voice of the child, including their views about family time with significant people in their lives.

Evidence and statements should be invited from all relevant professional sources who have had contact with the child e.g. IRO, teacher, foster carer, Children's Home etc.

Case Supervision:

All case supervision forms will begin with a brief pen picture of the child/ren, followed by an outline of the reason for current involvement

The voice of the child/young person section will always be completed to reflect upon activity / feedback from work to capture the child's voice.

Decision Making:

Wherever possible, decision making forms should include a section which 'talks directly to the child/ren', to explain the rationale for the decision and why it was considered to be in their best interest. This will help to explain why decisions were taken in the event of a data subject access request when the child is an adult.

The role of NYAS Advocacy Service:

The purpose of NYAS is to optimise and empower children and young people's involvement in strategic, local and day to day decisions that affect their lives. They challenge and champion children and young people's rights to ensure that when decisions are made children and young people are involved, consulted and listened to.

They offer issue based advocacy for children in care, care leavers and support to children and young people within the child protection process.

An advocate's remit allows them to independently focus solely on the needs of the child and not be distracted from other factors or wider influences.










Advocates provide a safe space to look at concerns and consider all the options available to a child or young person, whilst acknowledging issues and disagreements

in order to move forward whilst building skills to self-reflect, communicate and challenge where needed.

Contact NYAS on telephone 0808 808 1001 or www.nyas.net

Considerations:

The following are positive qualities or approaches that underpin effective communication and aid workers ensuring the voice of the child is captured.

-  Ensure that you make sufficient time to spend with each child or young person. No rushing! Remember to consider explaining to parents and carers in advance and seek consent where necessary.
-  Explain your role, to listen openly and to seek the views/ voice of the child without advising or judging
-  Consider how you could make the child more comfortable and work at the child's pace and learning / development needs. No professional jargon!
-  Be flexible in your approach. No one method or tool will work for every child. It's important to have a variety of tools to help with this.
-  Some children are much more comfortable if the 'talk' is not the focus. Activity based communication helps children feel more comfortable expressing their feelings, and helps build trust
-  Establish a working relationship with the young person and engage their interest. (Establish ground rules and boundaries)
-  Develop trust and a rapport through non-intrusive questions. Allow them time to ask questions
-  Understand their diversity needs, plus their interests and activities
-  Use open ended questions to give them an opportunity to share



Toolkit

All children have a right to provision which enables them to develop their personalities, talents and abilities irrespective of ethnicity, culture, religion, home language, family background, learning difficulties, disabilities or gender. These rights are laid out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Because each child is unique the methods used to engage with them should be creative and based around their individuality. The tools used should focus on the stage of social work involvement i.e. CIN, CIP, CIOC, so they can specifically focus around the child's individual circumstances.

There are a number of engagement tools to capture the voice of the child or young person.

These must not be used as assessment tools but can help to inform any assessments or plans.

The tool kits selected will be age and stage of development appropriate. A child with a learning disability for example, would undertake 1:1 work with direction from teaching staff who knows the child well and can advise about how best to achieve the child's voice.

Some examples of tool kits / resources:

- Three houses (6-11 age range). [The Three Houses templates - Free Social Work Tools and Resources: SocialWorkersToolbox.com](#) [three_houses_booklet_updated.pdf](#) ([partneringforsafety.com](#))
- 3 Islands (6-11 age range) [Three Islands Activity guidance, template & record sheets - Free Social Work Tools and Resources: SocialWorkersToolbox.com](#)

- Play therapy
- All about me – work sheets (all ages) [All about me booklet \(21 pages\) - Free Social Work Tools and Resources: SocialWorkersToolbox.com](#)
- CAFCASS – My Needs, Wishes and Feelings Pack (all ages) [Cafcass resources for professionals](#)
- *Mind of My Own* application
- Resources for children with autism [Templates and Resources | Autism Toolbox](#)

Overcoming Barriers to Effective Communication:

The norms of social interaction vary greatly in different cultures, as do the way in which emotions are expressed. For example, the concept of personal space varies between cultures and between different social settings. Children from cultures where eye contact and speaking about their feelings with adults can often find it very challenging sharing information about themselves with Social Workers. Social Workers should therefore be mindful of any barriers which could impact on a child's ability to communicate effectively with them. In particular, Social Workers should be honest about their own professional ability to receive and analyse information from the child in an impartial way.

The following examples are barriers to effective communications which will have a negative effect on the quality of information being obtained about the child in any interview setting.

- Not listening carefully to what is being said.
- Noting only words rather than other non-verbal communication. → Being unable to suspend judgement or pre-conceived views.
- Using unsuitable or unfamiliar language.
- Being unable to be impartial on topics regarded as 'off-limits' or taboo e.g. politics, religion, disabilities (mental and physical), sexuality and sex, racism.
- Lacking attention, interest, being distracted or rushed. → Differences in perceptions and viewpoint.
- Physical disabilities e.g. hearing problems, speech difficulties. → Being unable to identify non-verbal cues, gestures, posture and general body language which can make verbal communication alone less effective.
- Language differences and difficulties understanding unfamiliar accents.
- Expectations and prejudices which may lead to false assumptions or stereotyping.

Social Workers should continually review a child's understanding by offering clarification throughout interviews.

Phone calls, text messages and other communication methods that rely on technology are often less effective than face-to-face communication, however they can be a useful supplement to the voice of the child.

Appendix 1:

Quick guide to capturing the voice of the child:

Area	What to look for/ask the child	Considerations
Direct Contact	<p>what are the child/young person's views, opinions and wishes?</p>	<p>Is the level of engagement age appropriate and reflective of the child's understanding?</p> <p>How well do they understand the situation they are in and their circumstances?</p> <p>What do they want to happen?</p>
Communication	<p>Is the child able to communicate effectively?</p> <p>Do they need support to communicate effectively e.g. language barrier, ability, disability, trauma, culture</p>	<p>Is an interpreter or advocate needed?</p> <p>The use of photographs/images or other communication tools may assist.</p> <p>Are there known past events about the child that could affect their ability to talk freely</p>
Observations	<p>What is the child's behaviour like?</p> <p>Consider whether they are happy, sad, lively, tired/lethargic. Give examples.</p> <p>Are there any health issues that impacts on the child's ability to engage/ interact? If so what?</p> <p>What makes the child happy and sad and what makes them feel better when they are sad?</p> <p>What is the child's relationship like with their parents/carers?</p> <p>Does their behaviour change in their presence? How does</p>	<p>Use of role play activities, puppets, clip art, pictures, photographs, feelings box/images can be of assistance.</p> <p>Consider the facial expressions and body language of the child, parents/carers etc.</p> <p>Does this match verbal responses?</p> <p>Does the child display any behaviour which is of concern? If so further investigation should be sought.</p>

	<p>the child react to other family members, adults?</p> <p>Does the child demonstrate strong attachments?</p>	<p>Consider interviewing the child with and without their parents/carers.</p>
Venue	<p>Is the meeting informal or formal?</p> <p>Is it taking place in a location that is in the best interests of the child or in response to where they say they would like it to take place?</p> <p>Is the time convenient for the child?</p> <p>Who else is in attendance?</p>	<p>The venue and location of meetings will have an important influence on the outcome. If informal, consider how this can be accommodated</p> <p>Look at alternative meeting locations to aid the purpose and objectives of the meeting.</p> <p>Do not make assumptions about where meetings should take place.</p> <p>When requests from the child can be accommodated, this should be considered.</p> <p>Think carefully about who needs to be there and how this will add value to the meeting.</p>
Recording	<p>Does the meeting and subsequent plan acknowledge the views of the child?</p>	<p>Has the voice of the child been recorded in a clear and concise way?</p> <p>Where the views or wishes cannot be accommodated this should be stated and the reason why so that there is a clear understanding for all parties concerned.</p>
Other factors	<p>Are there any social relationships that can be used to support the child?</p> <p>Are there any other professional relationships whose views can assist with the voice of the child?</p>	<p>Consider informal relationships e.g. community based. Consider input from other professionals e.g. teacher</p>