

Practice Guidance Number 1

Ensuring the Child's Voice is clearly heard in all work

Ofsted's thematic report into learning lessons from Serious Case Reviews found that a recurrent theme is that not enough importance is given to listening to 'the voice of the child'. This report by Ofsted considered this theme further and found that in too many cases:

1. The child was not seen frequently enough by the professionals involved, or was not asked about their views or feelings.
2. Agencies did not listen to adults who tried to speak on behalf of the child and who had important information to contribute.
3. Parents and carers prevented practitioners from seeing and listening to the child.
4. Practitioners focused too much on the needs of the parents, especially vulnerable parents, and overlooked the implications for the child.
5. Agencies did not interpret their findings well enough to protect the child.

What do we mean by 'the child's voice'? This does not only refer to what children say directly, but to many other aspects of their presentation. It means seeing their experiences from their point of view.

Why is the Child's Voice important? Child focussed work means children feel listened to, plans are more successful when they are involved, and prompt decisions are made about safeguarding when necessary.

Here are some ways to ensure all work includes a strong sense of what life is like for a particular child at that particular time:

- Talk to children about their lives, their likes and dislikes, hopes and dreams, worries and fears. Talking to children is dependent upon their age and level of understanding. If children are able to talk there are a variety of ways of gaining the above through direct work techniques such as 'Three Houses', 'A Day in the Life', 'Feelings Faces'. Record what children say in '**DIRECT QUOTES**' (eg 'I feel sad/happy/worried when..') This is more powerful than something interpreted by a professional.
- Children **MUST** be seen alone. They may be inhibited to talk openly about their experiences by the presence of their parent or carer.
- Consider location. Children may feel less inhibited about speaking if they are in a safe neutral setting.
- Even if children are too young to speak it is still essential that workers convey a sense of what life is like for them. This can be done through a variety of ways. Describe their presentation, how others interact with them and how they respond, comment on whether you consider they are functioning at a developmentally appropriate level.
- Complete **Child's Profile** and upload in documents.

- Children may have other means of speaking other than verbal speech such as Makaton or signs and symbols. Be creative.
- Encourage children to draw or write about themselves and their lives. Use a range of ideas including those from the 'Anti Colouring Book'. Start off non specific such as 'draw your favourite food, favourite pop star', then be more directive around 'draw where you live, who lives there, draw a picture of a happy day, a sad day, what do you wish was different, who is special' etc.
- Describe the child's physical appearance, do they appear thin, pale, dark shadows under their eyes, listless, or do they appear curious, 'smiley', active.
- Observe the interactions between the child and parents or carers. Is there any difference in their interactions with people? Describe the child's interactions with professionals. What is your hypothesis about this behaviour? Does the child appear relaxed, wary, or overly familiar? Does the child respond as you would expect a child to respond in that situation?
- Ensure you include the views of other significant people in the child's life who may have contributions to make about the child's experiences from grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbours and teachers. Ofsted found that these people often had a unique insight into the lives of children yet their views were given less weight than the views of professionals.
- Include the views of fathers; they may have useful information to share, even if there are concerns about them.
- Use independent advocates to ascertain children's views. Sometimes they can bring valuable context to children's experiences.
- Encourage children to participate in their Case Conferences or Child Action Meetings and in the plans drawn up about them. They can do this directly by attending meetings or contribute by putting something in writing or drawing a picture, or giving someone a 'message' from them.
- Use the Case Conference packs to engage children in the process of conferences.

Remember, 'When professionals have concerns about their own personal safety, they must always consider the implications for children from exposure to the same risk factors'

The purpose of using a variety of methods to ascertain children's views is to ensure that the child's life experiences are clearly understood by the workers involved. Asking the question 'what is it like for this child living in this family' can help to ensure we convey the situation from the child's perspective and are giving weight and consideration to the impact on the child of any parental issues.

Reference :Ofsted (2010). *The voice of the child: learning lessons from serious case reviews. A thematic review of Ofsted's evaluation of serious case reviews from 1 April to 30 September 2010.* London: Ofsted