

The Voice of the Child



What do you need to know about the voice of the child?

- Hearing the voice of the child is an essential part of safeguarding – it helps practitioners to develop an understanding of the lived experience of the child, and what needs to happen to keep them safe from harm
- Consider the ‘voice of the child’ in the broadest terms – children will communicate in different ways, for example through behaviour, movement, body language, speech, play. Practitioners must be prepared to receive, interpret and act upon what the child is communicating, however they do so
- Children and young people have a right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives. Their opinions must be sought, valued and heard, and included in decision-making.
- It is the responsibility of all practitioners to ensure that they are working *in partnership* with children and young people, rather than doing things *for* or *to* them. Seeking a child’s views is an integral part of working in partnership with them
- Research by the NSPCC showed that in terms of children being able to make disclosures that *‘for many, when the abuse started, they were developmentally unable to understand that the abuse was wrong or they sensed that the abuse was wrong but lacked the vocabulary to describe or confirm their anxiety about it.’* Furthermore, the research found that *‘young people did not feel that they could disclose their abuse at the time but they would have liked someone to notice and ask them.’*

What can prevent us from ensuring that we hear, and capture, the voice of the child?

- Local and national reviews show us that sometimes practitioners focus too much on the needs of parents and overlook the implications for the child. Practitioners were also found to too readily accept the view and explanation given by a parent, rather than focussing on seeing and talking to the child directly

- Practitioners sometimes believe there is no way of finding out the child's views and experiences because they cannot speak and so do not make attempts to hear the voice of the child
- Research shows that a child disclosing abuse or neglect is rarely a straightforward process of just telling someone what is happening. Many disclosures were either not recognised or understood, or they were dismissed, played down or ignored; this meant that no action was taken to protect or support the young person.

As practitioners, how can we ensure we seek to hear, and capture, the voice of the child?

- Effective listening and communication requires respect for whoever we are listening to. We need to believe that children of all ages, backgrounds and abilities are unique and are worth listening to. This is connected to our view of children: do we see the child we are working with as wilful or obedient, shy or confident, talkative or quiet. Reflect on how your view of the child may impact on how you communicate with them and ensure that any ideas you hold of that child are not clouding your ability to communicate with them
- Use play, mime, and pictures to communicate with children and to find out about their lived experience
- Use Signs of Safety tools - <http://intranet.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/childrens-integrated-services/cis-signs-of-safety> – to engage with children.
- If you are working with non-verbal children then consider the following:
 - what is the child demonstrating about their needs, wishes, experiences through their non-verbal communication, presentation and behaviour
 - what would the child (including an unborn child) say they needed/wanted if they could speak, and include that in your assessments instead. For example, if you are working with a family with a baby you could say: whilst they are too young to tell us, if they could speak they would say “I want my parents to stop fighting and provide a safe, loving home for me to grow up in”
- See and speak to the child alone, in safe places that meet their needs. This may need to be done away from the family home to give them the freedom to speak about the care they receive away from their parent or carer
- Be alert to parents who prevent access to the child – and escalate your concerns if you are not able to see and speak to the child alone
- Working with families with several children can make it challenging to see each child alone – consider undertaking joint visits with a colleague so that you can see and speak to each child alone

- Effective recording is essential in capturing the voice of the child – where possible record the exact words used by the child

Further reading...

- NSPCC report *No one noticed, no one heard* can be found here - <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/2013/no-one-noticed-no-one-heard/>
- Ofsted report *The voice of the child: learning lessons from serious case reviews* can be accessed here - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/526981/The_voice_of_the_child.pdf

Suggested activities

In your team, pick a case with a non-verbal child and look at ways of communicating effectively with them and ensuring their views, feelings and experiences can be understood and acted upon

Select one of your cases individually or within a team, review case notes and the action plan – considering if the voice of the child is effectively captured / reflected.