



Communicating with children during assessment and intervention

Based on material from:

- *Communication a Two Way Process* – Dalzell and Thomas, 2006, NCB (online resource)
- *Putting Analysis into Assessment* – Dalzell and Sawyer, 2007, NCB
- *Say it your Own Way: Children's participation in assessment a guide and resources* – Hutton and Partridge, 2006, Barnardo's

Effective involvement

- Start off with a belief that children are competent. With the right information they can make informed decisions but they need time and explanations about what is happening and why. Provide as much information as you can so that so that children and young people can contribute meaningfully. Ensure they understand who you are, the purpose of the interview or session, why you are working in this way, what will happen to the information shared.
- Practitioners need to develop their communication skills, experiment with their creativity and find opportunities to build their confidence in communicating with children of different ages and backgrounds. Engage the skills of respectful listening, conveying interest, working with emotional warmth and respect and showing empathetic concern.
- Think about practical considerations – who is going to be involved, when are you going to do the work, where are you going to be working, do you need interpreters, are you going to make use of new technologies?
- Give young people as much choice as possible about the arrangements for any sessions or meetings. Think about fitting in with their timetable, i.e., do they have after school activities that you are interfering with? When and where feel comfortable and safe for them?
- Think about how you are going to involve the adults in the child's life. Is it appropriate to communicate with a parent or carer present or does the context require that you see a child alone? What role might foster carers or other supportive adults play? Can you co- work with them or do they need to be briefed to support the work in a different way?
- Think about diversity issues – not just in terms of whether an interpreter is needed, but also how the concepts you are using might be received by a child with a different cultural experience. Also, for children with disabilities: what is this child's chosen communication mode? Is there a worker who has experience of communicating with this child using a particular method, e.g., Makaton, Bliss symbolics?
- Creating the right culture means establishing trust with a young person. This may feel challenging in a short timescale but things like being honest about what might happen and the boundaries of confidentiality, being reliable and turning up when you say you are going to, following through on actions you have said you would, all contribute to developing an atmosphere of trust.

- Make sure children and young people are informed about and are enabled to access independent advocacy services if required.
- Think about what tools and techniques you will use. Make sure you allow some time for preparation and planning, even in initial contacts and assessments: try to create a space where you can think about the child and what might be helpful in trying to communicate with them. If possible use a session planning sheet like the ones in *Say it Your Own Way* (Hutton and Partridge, 2006).
- Start with what is important to the child. Even though it is helpful to develop a clear agenda it is important to be aware that whatever is preoccupying the child will have an impact on the communication. Go at the child's pace and gradually build a picture of their needs. Be flexible in response to what children and young people's say – don't try to stick rigidly to the adult agenda for a session if this clearly isn't working.
- Keep developmental considerations in mind – what do you know about the possible interests and capabilities of a child of this age and stage of development (but don't forget individual differences)? Also think about the possible barriers created by age, such as adolescent embarrassment and self-consciousness.
- Make sure you keep a holistic focus in the communication with children. Focus on the positive areas of their lives and relationships, their strengths and interests as well as the areas that are causing concern.
- Be aware of the impact of adverse experiences on a child's ability to engage and communicate. For example, are they recently traumatised and in shock, experiencing bereavement or loss, afraid for themselves or others, or blaming themselves?
- Also think generally about a child's mood or state. If they are tired, hungry, sad, annoyed or excited all of these things will have an impact on a session, whatever their age. Using a mood identifier at the start of a session can help here, for example, happy/sad faces.
- Deal sensitively with distress. Do not negate or dismiss children's feelings. Acknowledgement and acceptance are vital, even if distressing for you. This is recognition of the validity of the feelings as well as an opportunity to process experiences. Children's powerful feelings can also give clues that inform planning.
- Start and end sessions well. Start by making sure children are informed and engaging willingly. Give the child/young person advance warning of the end. Always acknowledge children and young people's contribution – the hard work they are putting in, or how difficult it might have been to share information and talk to you. Give them feedback after a session or following their input.

Good practice checklist for reflection and to assist in analysis

- How well do I know the child?
- Which adults know the child best and what do they think?
- How has the child defined the problems in their family life and the effect on them?
- Under what circumstances did the child express their views or feelings? What has occurred and what did he/she want to happen?
- What has been observed regarding the child's way of relating and responding to adults (consider attachment)?
- What do you know about research in relation to the experiences the child has had?
- What communication methods have you used?
- How confident are you that you have been able to establish the child's views, wishes and feelings, and that you can represent them in a way that will impact on decision making and future plans?
- What themes or issues have occurred across the sessions? What is the significance of these and of events that have been discussed? What clues are there in the child's body language?
- How does the understanding that is building from the communication with the child fit with information from other sources? How does this information fit into a chronology – for example, links between significant events and the child's responses?
- How does the experience of this direct work inform your thinking and recommendations?
- What further work is needed to help this child to integrate their experiences, begin the healing process and move forward?

Useful Approaches and Techniques

Children don't see their circumstances using the language in the assessment framework. They are more likely to communicate about:

- Where I live
- Who lives with me
- Who I see
- My day
- Likes and dislikes
- Who is important to me
- What's going on at home and at school

Try to use a variety of approaches .Draw on resources such as those in *Say it Your Own Way* (Hutton and Partridge, 2006). These are pictorial worksheets aimed at exploring the areas outlined above whilst helping you to:

- Explain assessment processes to children
- Communicate with children
- Help children to express their views using creative methods
- Develop insight into their understanding of what is happening
- Incorporate their views, values and wishes into the assessment process
- Reflect on and order children’s views before recording on statutory forms

Even if you use readymade communication tools, try to adapt them to the needs of individual children. For example, make a big version of an eco map on the floor or use rolls of wallpaper to create a life path.

Other activities which may be helpful are:

Draw and write	A technique developed in health research which both gives permission to express views and overcomes literacy problems. The child is asked to think about a topic, such as ‘everything that keeps me healthy ‘ or ‘things that make me sad’ and is asked to write , draw or say out loud everything they can think of. Cartooning or graffiti can also be used with older children.
Think/say	Allowing a child to represent what they would say [in a speech bubble] and what they would keep private [in a thought bubble] about a topic. This can help in making connections between feelings and behaviour. This technique and the previous one can be used in the first or third person.
Role play/third object	This can be a way of helping a child to have a voice in a less threatening way; it also taps into the younger child’s imaginary world. Teddy bears, dolls, puppets, play people [Lego, Playmobil etc], toy telephones and play houses are all potentially useful here. Encouraging acting out games is another helpful way of engaging with young children but caution must be used in interpreting these.
Creative writing	A useful way to utilise the third object concept with older children and teenagers is to encourage them to write stories or poems in the third person, or a story board or script for a t.v show (for example). Young people who are very clear about using their own voice may feel

	<p>confident enough to write poems or narrative in the first person. If they have talent in this area it is an important opportunity for giving praise and building self esteem.</p>
Music and sound	<p>Young children engage well with sound and can be encouraged to use different types of sounds to describe feelings as a step towards helping them tell you how events have made them feel. An older child may engage well with music rather than narrative, e.g, writing song lyrics or making music to express moods.</p>
Prompt questions	<p>Statements or questions relevant to the child's circumstances that elicit a response which throws light on an aspect of their life. For example: who I go to for advice, who is the person who makes the rules in our house? What happens when dad gets back from the pub? The child can either write, draw or talk about their answers. Many of the work sheets in <i>Say it Your Own Way</i> provide prompt questions.</p>
Scenarios	<p>Create a fictitious scenario which contains elements which have something in common with the child in question's situation. Then have some discussion questions ready or written at the bottom the scenario. This can also be done pictorially as a cartoon or even a homemade book.</p>
If you could take charge	<p>Handing back control to a child can be very powerful. Young people may just need permission to be expert in their own situations. Ask young people what messages they would like to give to others, what advice they would give to someone in their situation if they were outside looking in, how they would describe a problem to an outsider, how they would resolve a problem if they were able to, or who they would ask for help in a crisis.</p>
Eco mapping	<p>A generic term for mapping-out of relationships, ideas or systems. Helping children to think about themselves in the context of their family and environment, for example: who is important to them? What is the quality of that relationship? It can help to look at wider issues like neighbourhood safety as well.</p>

Metaphors and imagery	Using the idea of travel or a map to plan a route from where a child is now to where they want to get to, or to reflect on the route that has led to where they are now. Children can use stickers or symbols to denote significant things, feelings, etc. Or, pictures can be used such as a wall for writing problems on or a tree to show growth, hopes, aspirations, etc.
Scaling and scoring	Building on one of the key concepts in solution-focused work: scales can be used to assess feelings, seriousness of risk, likelihood of things happening. For example: on a scale of 0-10, how worried are you about dad coming out of prison?
The worst ever	The worker asks the child to design the worst ever of something (e.g., day at school or review meeting) as a starting point for vocalising what they want and need and how to make things better.
Voting	For a simple response to some questions you can use a voting mechanism such as thumbs up or down, happy/sad faces in response to something, yes/no or agree/disagree cards. This can be done as a game with statements written in advance and the child asked to vote on them.
Wish catcher	Can be a net which is hung up to catch wishes. Child can place drawings, objects or pieces of writing in the net.
Walking tour	The child can be asked to take you on a tour of somewhere that is important to them. Digital photography can be used along the way and then captions can be added to the photos upon return.