

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Key Messages

- Children need to be consulted at all stages of their care journey; involving children can improve the quality of decisions and lead to more stable placements.
- Looked after children and young people do not readily talk about their worries or concerns. Social workers and carers need to pay attention not only to what children say, but also what they do not say and how they behave.
- Social workers must ensure they make sufficient time to spend alone with each child or young person.
- It is important to have a variety of tools available to help communicate with children. For younger children, this might include toys, coloured pencils and flashcards; for young people, tools might include diaries, cameras and creative arts.
- Activity-based communication helps both children and young people feel more comfortable expressing their feelings, and helps build trust.

The importance of listening to children

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Articles 12 and 13) enshrines the child's right to express his or her views in all matters, and the right to freedom of expression. This includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. Practitioners need to ensure these rights are upheld in all matters affecting looked after children.

Children experience a range of problems and worries at home, at school, with their peers and in the community (Cossar et al, 2011). Some children may talk in a way that 'normalises' abuse and neglect because that's what they have experienced as normal. Alternatively, they may avoid discussing these topics because they are painful to acknowledge or because they're concerned about the consequences of telling.

Professionals and carers need to pay attention not only to what the child says, but also to what they are not saying. They also need to pay attention to how the child behaves. Listening to the child's views will help social workers and others to build a trusting relationship (Cossar et al, 2011).

It is important that children are involved in planning and decision making but in many cases this does not happen (The Care Inquiry, 2013). Around three-quarters (73%) of looked after children feel their opinions 'always' or 'usually' make a difference (OCD, 2012). However, this means more than a quarter of children do not feel their

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

views often count. Even if their views do not prevail, children want to be asked what they think and to feel they have been heard (The Care Inquiry, 2013).

Including children in decision making can improve the quality of the decisions and lead to more stable placements (Thomas, 2009). (See the Briefing 14 on '[Placement stability and permanence](#)'.) Children need to be consulted at various stages of the care process, including:

- prior to admission to care – children need to understand what is being considered so they have as much control and choice as possible
- when choosing a placement – a placement is more likely to succeed if the child plays a part in choosing it
- during reviews and planning meetings – taking part in formal meetings to discuss their care is beneficial for children
- during everyday life in care. (Thomas, 2009)

Research with foster children shows they want to be heard and have their views taken into account. This includes their views on:

- contact with their birth family
- the kind of foster family they want
- the way decisions are taken in their day-to-day lives
- their long-term future. (Sinclair, 2005)

The importance of relationships

Relationships should be the lens through which all work with individual children, family members and carers should be viewed (The Care Inquiry 2013:9)

Looked after children and young people are vulnerable individuals. The experiences that led to placement, including neglect or maltreatment, will have resulted in separation from their birth family which, even if unsafe, was the home they knew. Developing trusting relationships is important for these children to help them build security through attachments (see Briefing 2 on [Attachment theory and research](#)). Continuity of relationships is key to helping children construct their identity and develop a strong sense of belonging. All of these are crucial for their well-being (The Care Inquiry, 2013).

A consistent message is that looked after children value relationships with people who:

- are always there for them

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

- love, accept and respect them for who they are
- are ambitious for them and help them succeed
- stick with them through thick and thin
- are willing to go the extra mile, and
- treat them as part of their family, or part of their life, beyond childhood and into adulthood. (The Care Inquiry 2013)

These relationships encompass birth parents, the wider birth family, carers and social workers (Cossar et al, 2011).

It is important that practitioners, foster carers and adoptive parents are able to help children overcome difficulties that are the result of earlier adversities. For example, children who have been maltreated may have difficulty getting on with others because of their earlier experiences. Learning how to get on with others starts from birth, but for maltreated children this learning experience may have been inconsistent or disrupted. Not being able to get on with others can have a negative impact on children's well-being and, for care leavers, their transition to adulthood (Ryan, 2012). Learning to deal with conflict and manage disagreements is crucial, and social workers and carers have an important role to play in helping children with this (Cameron and Moss, 2011). (See Briefing 5 on '[Early childhood trauma and therapeutic parenting](#)'.)

The National Children's Bureau has developed a relationship-based intervention to help young people learn about and practise communication and how to get on with others: [How to Make Relationships Matter](#)

Challenges and facilitating effective communication

Social workers often have to ask children questions that may be difficult or distressing for them. Children are sensitive to their social worker's communication skills and often find it hard to talk about their worries or concerns. They do not like being bombarded by questions or to feel that their words are being 'twisted'.

Discussing sensitive issues with children is highly skilled work and requires social workers to devote sufficient time to building a trusting relationship with them (Cossar et al, 2011).

There are a number of areas that practitioners need to think about at all stages of the child protection and care planning process:

- how best to involve each individual child in discussions

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

- finding regular time to speak with the child alone and recognising that building trust will take time (children need to be seen on their own, unless there is a specific reason not to do so, so that their views can be represented)
- making sense of the child's view of the situation and being aware of the strategies the child may have developed to deal with problems in the family (where there is a difficult relationship between the parents and social worker, the child may align themselves with their parents, making it difficult for the social worker to develop a trusting relationship with the child)
- maintaining an openness to the child's view (there may be disagreement between the child and the professional – where there are different views, the child's views should be represented and heard and the social worker's position needs to be explained)
- making sure that the child is given information (children are often only given partial information, which can add to their worries) (Cossar et al, 2011).

Conflicts can arise when there are differences of opinion between social workers, carers and children – for example, with regard to placement, family contact, school and leisure activities. It is important to balance the child's wishes with what is in their best interests. Where a child's wishes are overridden, the child should be given an explanation of the reasons and acknowledgement of their concerns (Thomas, 2009). Social workers need to try to resolve any differences of opinion as unresolved differences can increase the likelihood of emergency admissions into care, which can lead to placement instability (Oliver, 2010).

The research report commissioned by the Office of the Children's Commissioner – [Don't Make Assumptions](#) (Cossar et al, 2011) – includes, in their own words, children's ideas for what social workers and other professionals should do and how they should behave (see pages 83-85)

What skills do social workers need to communicate effectively with children and young people?

In order to communicate effectively with children, social workers need to be confident and have a range of skills. These include:

- active listening
- empathising with the child's point of view
- developing trusting relationships
- understanding non-verbal communication
- building rapport

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

- explaining, summarising and providing information
- giving feedback in a clear way
- understanding and explaining the boundaries of confidentiality (Dalzell and Chamberlain, 2006).

Practitioners need to work at the child's pace and tailor their communication style to the best way of communicating with individual children and young people. This requires time, patience, space and resources (Luckock et al, 2006). There are a number of core skills that enhance communication between children and their social worker and these can be categorised under four domains:

- **Doing:** using a variety of tools, interviewing techniques, listening and creative techniques, going at the child's pace, using child-centred communication
- **Being (personal qualities):** engaging and building relationships, building trust and safety, being caring, empathic, honest, sincere and warm
- **Being (ethical commitment):** eliciting children's views, providing information, maintaining confidentiality (where possible), providing uninterrupted time, being reliable, respectful and non-judgemental
- **Knowing and understanding:** having knowledge and understanding of how the social work role affects communication and how experiences affect communication and child development. (Lefevre, 2013)

Practitioners need to devise ways to support and encourage children to express their views, using methods such as play, games, activity-based work and the use of creative arts. These can enable children to feel more comfortable and to express and process their feelings. Activity-based work, playing games and having fun together can also enhance the relationship between child and social worker.

For young children, activities such as games, writing and drawing help to make the process more child-friendly (Thomas, 2009). To encourage young children to talk it is useful to have a bag containing a few toys, coloured pencils, paper, flash cards and worksheets with happy and sad faces (Thomas, 2009; Dalzell and Chamberlain, 2006). These methods may also be helpful when communicating with a child with a learning disability (Stone, 2001; Stalker and Connors, 2003).

Older children can be reluctant to share thoughts and feelings because of they fear these private things will be written down in their file and shared with strangers (Luckock et al, 2006). A range of methods can be used to promote communication with older children, including camcorders, cameras, diaries and scrapbooks (Holland et al, 2010). Some young people find it easier to communicate while on the move – when walking together, for example, or travelling by car. Others use photographs and videos to give insight into their lives.

Topic 9**Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People**

Support from managers is also needed to facilitate good communication with children and young people. Managers need to:

- believe that children are competent and can contribute effectively to assessment, decision making and planning
- have realistic expectations of the time it takes to communicate effectively with children
- prioritise communication with children
- understand the importance of developing trust and a strong working relationship
- be aware of the importance of providing services such as interpreters and advocates (Dalzell and Chamberlain, 2006).

The National Children's Bureau's training pack [Communicating with Children](#) includes a table of resources to support communication with children and young people, including specific resources for younger children, adolescents and disabled children

SCIE has produced a number of online learning resources on communication: [Communicating e-learning](#). These include e-learning on [Using play and the creative arts](#) to communicate with children and young people

The Children's Commissioner's research report [Don't Make Assumptions](#) (2011) includes examples of activities that can be used to facilitate communication with children of all ages – see pages 25-26

See Appendix F (p170) of the final report of [The Munro Review](#) for some examples of getting feedback from children – and see also The Signs of Safety Three Houses Tool (p30), which focuses on interviewing children through their own words and drawings using a 'house of worries', 'house of good things' and 'house of dreams'

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

A special edition of the New Zealand Journal [Social Work Now](#) (February 2012) focuses on children and young people's participation and child-centred practice. It discusses the meaning and reality of engagement with children and young people. The paper on 'Finding the Best Way to Work with Children and Young People: Good engagement and giving them a voice' (Williams et al) includes a number of helpful vignettes

Communicating with very young children

Communicating with children under the age of five brings particular challenges. In order to understand how children under five communicate practitioners need to have a good knowledge of child development and attachment (Norburn, 2013). They should also have an understanding of the impact of abuse and neglect on children's development and how this can affect communication.

Potential barriers to communicating with children under five include:

- hostile or non-compliant parents
- lack of confidence
- lack of resources to work creatively. (Norburn, 2013)

Observation of children under five is crucial, particularly for those with no verbal communication. Some examples of techniques for communicating with under-fives include:

- working with metaphors – using objects such as figures and animals
- ecomaps – using objects to represent themselves and others and placing them near or far away as the child wishes
- art or creative play
- masks or worksheets with faces showing different feelings. (Norburn, 2013)

Further examples of techniques for communicating with very young children can be found in the Research in Practice briefing: [Communicating Effectively with Children Under Five](#) (Norburn, 2013)

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Dealing with complaints

Children may wish to make a complaint about their care. The majority (40 per cent) of complaints are made through a social worker, with around 14 per cent using an advocate (Morgan, 2012).

Children do not always complain about their care directly to social workers or other practitioners. In 2009-10, more than 3,000 looked after children were counselled by ChildLine; this equates to one in 26 of all looked after children in the UK (NSPCC, 2011). Looked after children often contacted ChildLine because they felt they had no other trusted adults they could turn to. Many said they felt completely alone. Many looked after children counselled by ChildLine felt uncared for and at times they found it hard to accept the love and care they were given.

In terms of dealing with complaints, children have made a number of recommendations, including:

- take what children say seriously and respect their views and concerns
- read the complaint
- help children write down their complaint
- keep going until the complaint is sorted out
- keep children informed about what is happening
- don't automatically tell a child's carer that the child has made a complaint about them as this can make it difficult for the child. (Morgan, 2012)

See the report [Young People's Views on Complaints and Advocacy](#) (Morgan, 2012) by the Children's Rights Director for more suggestions from children and young people (pages 49-51) as to how complaints should be dealt with

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The Importance of Listening to Children

- A child's right to express his or her views is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Articles 12 and 13)
- Need to pay attention to what the child says AND what they are not saying and how the child behaves
- Listening to children's views helps to build a trusting relationship

2

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When to consult with CYP

- Children need to be consulted:
 - prior to admission to care - children need to understand what is being considered so they have as much control and choice as possible.
 - when choosing a placement - a placement is more likely to succeed if the child plays a part in choosing it
 - during reviews and planning meetings - taking part in formal meetings to discuss their care is beneficial for children
 - about their everyday lives in care

3

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The Importance of Relationships

- Trusting relationships are important to help children build attachments and security
- Children value relationships with people who
 - are always there for them
 - love, accept and respect them for who they are
 - are ambitious for them and help them succeed
 - stick with them through thick and thin
 - are willing to go the extra mile
 - treat them as part of their family, or part of their life, beyond childhood and into adulthood

4

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Challenges of Communicating with CYP

- Social workers have to ask children questions that may be difficult or distressing for them
- Discussing sensitive issues is highly skilled work, and needs sufficient time for social workers to build a trusting relationship
- Conflicts can arise over differences of opinion between social workers, carers and children
- Social workers need to maintain an openness to the child's view and explain their position. They need to try to resolve any differences as unresolved differences can lead to placement instability

5

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Skills Needed for Effective Communication

- active listening
- empathising with the child's point of view
- developing trusting relationships
- understanding non-verbal communication
- building rapport
- explaining, summarising and providing information
- giving feedback in a clear way
- understanding and explaining the boundaries of confidentiality (Dalzell and Chamberlain, 2006:8)

6

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Resources to Assist Communication

- For young children:
 - Toys, games, coloured pens, flashcards, worksheets, masks: help to make it more child friendly
- For Young People
 - camcorders, cameras, diaries, and scrapbooks. Some young people like to communicate while on the move (when walking together/ or in a car).

7

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Dealing with Complaints

- Complaints need to be listened to and taken seriously, respecting children's views and concerns
- Need to keep going until the complaint is sorted out
- Need to keep children informed about what is happening
- Some LAC feel completely alone and contact ChildLine to complain about their care

8

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Resources

- [Communicating With Children](#) (NCB)
- SCIE [Communicating e-learning](#)
- [Communicating Effectively With Under Fives-](#) Research in Practice

9

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

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Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

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Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Key questions for social workers

Methods

Suitable for self-directed learning or reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

Learning Outcome

Review how you develop relationships with children to ensure their views are taken into account.

Time Required

Two sessions of 45 minutes – one to review the questions below and make actions, and one as follow-up.

Process

Thinking of your current approach, answer the following questions:

- How do you ensure that children's rights are upheld?
- How can you be confident that you have a good knowledge and understanding of child development and children's communication at different ages? (see Briefing 3 on [Child development theory and research](#))
 - How do you make sure you have a sound understanding of the impact of maltreatment on children's development and communication? (see Briefings 4 and 5 on [Early brain development and maltreatment](#) and [Early childhood trauma and therapeutic parenting](#))
- What steps do you take to build a trusting relationship with each child?
- What steps do you take to ensure opportunities to talk with each child on their own?
- How do you listen actively to the child's wishes and feelings?
 - What steps do you take to ensure that your ways of engaging with children and young people are age appropriate?
- How do you ensure that the child is provided with information in a sensitive and timely manner?
- How do you provide support to the child regarding their identity (including life story work) and contact with birth family?
- How do you deal with complaints made by children?
 - How do you know whether this approach is effective?
- What steps do you take to seek out and take part in relevant training and development opportunities to address gaps in knowledge in relation to communicating with children?

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Key questions for social work managers

Methods

Suitable for self-directed learning or reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

Learning Outcome

Review how you support your staff to effectively communicate with children and young people, and identify possible areas for improvement.

Time Required

One session of 45 minutes

Process

Thinking of the systems and processes currently in place, answer the following questions:

- How do you use regular supervision to ensure that social workers are using a range of methods to communicate with children?
- What systems are in place to manage caseloads so that social workers have sufficient time to spend with children and birth parents?
- What systems are in place for effectively managing complaints made by children against carers?
 - How do you know whether these are effective?
- What steps do you take to actively encourage social workers to seek out and engage in relevant training and development in this area?

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Key questions for independent Reviewing Officers

Methods

Suitable for self-directed learning or reflection with a colleague or supervisor.

Learning Outcome

Review current systems for ensuring children's wishes and feelings are considered in care planning, and identify any gaps or areas for improvement.

Time Required

Two sessions of 45 minutes - one to review the questions below and make actions, and one as follow-up.

Process

Thinking of your current approach, answer the following questions:

- How do you monitor each child's care plan to ensure their rights, wishes and feelings have been considered?
- What steps do you take to ensure that the child's wishes and feelings are reviewed on a regular basis?
- How do you bring areas of poor practice in relation to engaging children in families to the attention of senior managers?

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Case study for social workers– Dillon

Methods

Suitable for a small group discussion. Individuals will need a copy of the case study for Dillon.

Learning Outcome

To identify appropriate communications styles and methods to support Dillon.

Time Required

30 minutes for discussion plus 15 minutes for feedback

Process

Give each group a hand-out of the case study for Dillon and ask each group to appoint someone to feedback their ideas.

Ask the group to read the case study and answer the following questions.

1. What communication methods would you consider using with Dillon to make sure that he is able to express his wishes and feelings, given his developmental delay?
2. How will you support the foster carers in managing Dillon if he becomes upset about seeing his birth mother?
3. What steps would you take to gather information effectively from Dillon's birth mother?
4. How would you convey this information to Dillon?
5. How will you support Dillon if contact goes ahead?

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Case study for foster carers and adopters– Dillon

Methods

Suitable for a small group discussion. Individuals will need a copy of the case study for Dillon.

Learning Outcome

To identify appropriate communications styles and methods to support Dillon.

Time Required

30 minutes for discussion plus 15 minutes for feedback

Process

Give each group a hand-out of the case study for Dillon and ask each group to appoint someone to feedback their ideas.

Ask the group to read the case study and answer the following questions.

1. What communication methods would you consider using with Dillon to make sure that he is able to express his wishes and feelings, given his developmental delay?
2. How will you support Dillon?

Topic 9 Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Emotional work with young people

Methods

Suitable for a facilitated workshop.

Learning Outcomes

- To develop awareness of the importance of listening and the qualities/skills required to listen effectively.
- To understand the impact of past experience on the ability to listen.
- To develop knowledge and understanding of how to talk with young people about the possibility of seeking additional help.
- To develop an appreciation of both the carer's relationship with the child or young person and that of others.

Time Required

90 minutes including:

- 30 minutes individual and paired work,
- 30 minutes debriefing,
- 30 minutes group discussion.

Process

Introduction

Placements were less likely to disrupt when carers...were rated as able to respond to the young people in relation to their emotional rather than their chronological age (for example by providing regular opportunities for play and nurture appropriate to a much younger child to meet earlier unmet needs) and the young people said that their carers listened to them and enabled them to talk about their past adverse experiences and current concerns.

Foster care relies on large quantities of emotional labour. Children and young people in foster placements may never have experienced secure relationships. They greatly appreciate placements where they feel that they are accepted and where others respond warmly to them. Warm close relationships with other adults are also likely to benefit them greatly.

Fostering Now: Messages from Research (Sinclair, 2005: 80)

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

Activity set up

In this exercise, participants are asked to remember details of a hurtful personal experience (guided to recall something that feels safe to remember and share) and then to take turns to speak about it with a partner and to listen to their partner's experience. (Some groups may prefer to start with exchanging ordinary experiences before moving on to discuss a hurtful experience). Participants are then asked to consider what made it easier or more difficult to talk to a partner about their hurtful experience and what made it easier or more difficult to listen.

Part 1 (30 minutes)

1. Individual work (5 minutes): ask participants to remember an experience in their life, perhaps as a child:
 - When they were emotionally hurt.
 - When in their life did this happen?
 - What happened?
2. Working with a partner, ask the participants to take turns to discuss the following:
 - Did they tell anyone about what happened?
 - If so, who and when?
 - Why did they choose to tell that person?
 - What was that person's response?
 - Did telling the person affect their relationship with her or him?
 - If so, how?
 - If they didn't tell anyone, why not?
 - What did they fear might happen?
 - If they didn't tell in words, how did they express their feelings?
 - Did they want people to notice their feelings?
 - How do they think this experience has affected their ability to:
 - Talk about their feelings and experiences
 - Help others talk to them about their feelings and experiences?

Part 2: de-briefing (30 minutes)

Lead a discussion with the whole group.

Ask participants the questions below about how it felt to talk about their experience and to listen to their partner's experience. Move the questions on and around the group, drawing out key points. Try to draw out learning points relating to:

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

- The skills required to listen (verbal and non-verbal).
- The beneficial effect of listening to and containing disclosure about difficult experiences.
- The emotional blocks we may have to listening.
- The importance of the relationship between speaker and listener.
- The rights of people (including children) to disclose only what they feel comfortable and/or ready to disclose and to whom they choose.
- The role of adults in providing support.

Questions

- How easy or difficult was it for participants to talk about their experience?
- How did the response of the person they told affect how easy it was to talk?
- How easy was it to listen?
 - Did listeners have particular feelings about what was being said?
- When listening, how can one recognise when there is a need to refer on, or when a professional counsellor might be beneficial?
- What made it hard to listen?
 - Do participants think this showed in their body language?
- What blocked listening?
- Summarise the factors that affect how easy or hard it is to listen to someone talk about difficult or hurtful experiences.

Part 3: possible issues to draw out of the discussion (30 minutes)

Continue the discussion with the whole group drawing out other key issues. For example:

- Children have a right to talk to someone with whom they feel comfortable.
- It is important that counsellors are not seen as the only people with whom young people can talk. Carers (or others) who may feel burdened with confidences and uncertain about how to respond need to be able to talk through the issues with someone with the appropriate skills.
- Foster carers and social workers need information about resources that are available locally. One task could be to find out if local counselling services will offer short-term assessments, support and advice to carers, as well as long-term counselling for young people in stable placements.
- Is it sometimes the case that young people find it easier to bring up a difficult subject with someone with whom they are not living, but then find it useful to talk things through with their carers?
- Are there skills-based workshops that could be organised to help carers and young people make the most of their relationship?

Topic 9

Communicating Effectively with Children and Young People

- What support do carers have and need in order to develop or use these skills?
- How would participants explore with a teenager the possibility of seeing a counsellor?
- What would they do if the teenager said they would rather talk to them or to someone who was unqualified?