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What is the Voice of the Child?

The right of a child or young person to be heard is included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and reinforced by national legislation and guidance such as the Social Services and Well Being (Wales) Act 2014 and the Wales Safeguarding Procedures.

The voice of the child refers not only to what children (including those who are preverbal and non-verbal) say directly but to their behaviour as a whole. Facilitating the child's voice involves developing relationships and creating environments in which children feel comfortable and confident sharing their thoughts and experiences. It also means making sure that children's views, opinions, and preferences are sought and listened to when decisions are made which impact their life.



Voice of the Child



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Why is it so important

Effective safeguarding systems **must** be child centred. Problems can arise when practitioners lose sight of the needs/views of children and this has been highlighted in a number of Child Practice Reviews, both regional and national. Regional examples include:

7 minute briefing Child D (FINAL 11.03.24) (gwentsafeguarding.org.uk);

7 minute briefing Child E - SEWSCB 1-2022 (gwentsafeguarding.org.uk);

CPR 7 minute briefing Child L (gwentsafeguarding.org.uk)

National learning has indicated that common problems include children not being seen frequently enough or being asked about their feelings, practitioners not challenging barriers to seeing the child and hearing their voice, views of adults being prioritised, difficulty in understanding and reflecting upon the voice of the child, and a lack of trusted relationships between practitioners and children. Voice of the child: learning from case reviews (nspcc.org.uk)

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Resources/find out more

- Safeguarding Wales – Promoting Child Participation
- Safeguarding Wales – Giving Children and Young People a Voice in the Conference
- Voice of the child: learning from case reviews (nspcc.org.uk)
- 7 Minute Briefing professional curiosity (gwentsafeguarding.org.uk)
- The National Youth Advocacy Service | NYAS
- Person-Centred Thinking Tools - Helen Sanderson Associates

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Who

It is important to consider who is best placed to seek and understand the voice of the child. Learning from case reviews demonstrates that a trusted relationship is key to this.

Consideration needs to be given as to who has the best relationship with the child (for example, this may be a teacher/youth worker). However, it is also important to consider the role of the practitioner and the most appropriate person to seek the voice of the child.

All children have the right for advocacy. The Welsh Active Offer allows children and young people to access advocacy services in a variety of circumstances. However, in some cases, for example criminal proceedings, an assessment should be considered for the involvement of an intermediary.

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Overcoming barriers

Not all children/young people will have the capacity or ability to communicate through language. Practitioners need to be flexible and creative in their approach, to support them in sharing their wishes and feelings, and having their voice heard. The list below gives some examples of how barriers can be overcome.

- Identify the usual way a child communicates
- Be open to interpreting children's behaviour as communication, and the meaning behind changes or disruptive behaviour
- Get to know the language and expressions that the child/young person uses
- Listen to siblings and other adults in the child or young person's life
- Remain professionally curious when speaking with children and their families to effectively triangulate information and ensure the child's voice is heard.
- Be adaptable and flexible in ways of working to ensure the child or young person feels safe and comfortable in expressing their views, wishes and feelings
- Time, location, and platform for engagement should always be considered.

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Barriers to effective communication

Practice Reviews have identified some common barriers to effective communication as described below, however this list is not exhaustive and other barriers may occur.

- Children with additional needs/communication needs
- Capacity and understanding
- Attachment difficulties
- Culture/language differences
- Over reliance on parents/carers narrative
- Difficulties speaking to child alone
- Difficulties trusting professionals
- Self esteem
- Adolescents/young people being seen as 'hard to engage.'

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How Can We Do This?

This is a fluid and continuous process. Even when we have obtained the child or young person's voice, we should always seek to review and clarify their wishes, and feelings.

See the child – **focus** on the child and **listen** to what they say
Observe interactions and notice body language and behaviour
Ask about abuse and neglect
Listen to siblings and other children
Record what you hear and what you see
Interpret what the child says, and what they do, referencing indicators of abuse and exploitation
Establish the child's wishes and feelings

When there are multiple professionals involved with a child or young person, there should be ongoing consideration to ensure consistency and avoiding repetition for the child or young person.