



Best Practice Guidance

Capturing the Child's Voice in Case Recordings

Introduction

Accurately capturing the child's voice within our case recordings is a critical skill in telling and giving meaning to the child's story and providing a narrative that helps support children and young people to understand their experiences, identity and culture. In addition, every child and young person has the right to be heard and be involved in decision making that affects their lives and we have a responsibility to ensure that this happens

Understanding the child's lived experience and recording with clarity and compassion, even in the most difficult of circumstances, can support better long term outcomes for children and young people who come into contact with our services. Conversely, research tells us that very poor recording can potentially have an extremely negative impact and far reaching consequences for those children and young people who later access their records or progress through life without a clear sense of identity.

Purpose

The aim of this guidance is to encourage a focus on the skills associated with capturing the child's voice in case recordings. Improving our recording practice enables us to truly place the child at the centre of all of our work and involve them in decisions that affect their lives, whilst also supporting a clear articulation of the child's story and rationale for our involvement which, when later accessed, could ultimately support better understanding, healing and identity.

This guidance is split into three sections:

- Principles underpinning capturing the child's voice in case recordings
- Characteristics of a good recording
- Practice Pointers

Before continuing to read this guidance, you are encouraged to watch this short 6 minute video produced by MIRRA: Memory, Identity, and Rights in Records for Care Leavers.

The MIRRA project was led by University College London's (UCL) department of information studies and carried out with the Care Leaver's Association and the charity Family Action. Please 'control and click' the link contained here to the [introductory video](#). This profoundly articulates why it's important to capture the child's voice in recordings.

Research by (UCL) shows that how records are written, what has been included or lost and how access is provided in adulthood all have a significant impact on care leavers lives. It is our responsibility to honour the child's voice in our recording and acknowledge the power and influence we have in doing so.

Having watched the video we'll now explore '**what a good recording looks like**' and the principles and characteristics of effective recording.

Principles underpinning capturing the child's voice in case recordings

In Hull Children Young People and Family Services (CYPFS), our values and beliefs influence how we work with families and the content of our recordings. We therefore need to be explicit about our **principles** and how these will be applied when recording on a child's case record:

- Every child and young person is unique – each will have their own talents, worries, goals, needs, characteristics and identity that we must privilege in our work
- Working relationships with children and young people are critical and we will always listen to them and treat them with respect
- The child's lived experience is at the heart of our practice – their safety and what life looks like for them on a daily basis must influence and shape our work
- Every professional working with children and young people must ensure that the child's voice is heard, considered and taken into account in planning, decision making and service provision

There is also a clear legal duty to listen to the wishes and feelings of all children as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990); the paramountcy principle of The Children Act (1989) and Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018).

Characteristics of a good recording capturing the child's voice

A good recording must reflect the child's voice in the 'here and now', whilst also providing a coherent narrative developed over time of their story, their voice and experiences across the life course. Recordings should always have the child as a future reader in mind and critical thinking and analysis should be themed throughout:

Aims of recording

- Provide a comprehensive picture of the child, **their voice** and their story
- Be specific about the individual child's **needs, wishes and views** - linked to immediate, medium and long term issues, circumstances, needs and outcomes
- Provide an understanding of **why** we are/have been involved and the parallel work undertaken

Context

- Show an understanding of child's family history, including themes, patterns and cumulative impact, highlighting the child's lived experience throughout and their dynamic and evolving voice within their story
- Whilst it is important to be clear about your concerns and the reasons behind these in your recordings, be mindful that reading such information in the future could be highly traumatic for care/service experienced young people/adults.

Style

- Be logical and show your thinking so it would be clear to the young person if they accessed their case file in the future how you have used the information available to you to reach certain conclusions – and how you have represented their voice and experience within this.
- Be succinct, concise and use respectful language. Recordings should be free of jargon, especially words and phrases that will be meaningless to the child and do not resonate with their voice.
- Faithfully record exactly what the child or young person says and document it in inverted commas and bold. You can then give your own analysis of the meaning and significance of what has been said, but the fidelity of recording the child's own words is critical.

Evidence

- Describe clearly how it might feel to be standing in the child's shoes and the ways in which the child's perspective has been obtained (by using Mind of My Own statements, through direct conversation, play, observation, understanding of research about children in similar circumstances, etc.)

Good recordings are informed by good relationships

Relationship based practice necessitates effective engagement with children and young people. Before we can go on to capture the child's voice in our recordings we must first build a relationship where there is a feeling of trust by which children and young people feel supported and are encouraged to express their views.

We need to understand what life is like on a day to day basis and see their world as they experience it. Getting a clear picture of 'a day in their life' will always be best informed when the information has come from the child. A child's voice refers not only to verbalisations but also cues picked up related to their lived experience.

In developing a good relationship it is important to see the child or young person on their own in an environment that they feel comfortable with. This should be away from parents or carers and give the opportunity for children to speak openly about their worries.

The importance of direct work and observation

Each child and young person is unique and therefore the methods used to engage them should be creative and based around their individual characteristics such as age, stage of development and needs arising from ethnicity, culture, religion, home language, family background, learning needs and disabilities.

Workers can access a variety of resources online - the [Social Workers Toolbox](#) is very good and includes hundreds of resources such as All about Me Book, Three Islands, Fairies and Wizards, Three Houses ,Helping Hand, I'm One of a Kind, My Feelings Workbook etc. However, be mindful not to keep using the same tools over and over again as children will get bored and disengage. [Research in Practice](#) also offer a range of evidence based direct work tools and other resources.

All direct work should be attached to the child's case record with a reflective analysis of what this tells us and a clear link to assessment and planning work. CYPFS also facilitates a number of training courses around 'direct work with children' which looks at how to communicate effectively using various tools.

Working with older children and teenagers will of course require using different methods aligned to their developmental needs and preferred ways of communicating.

The [Mind of My Own](#) app (MOMO) is also an important tool whereby children and young people can express their views and feelings whenever they choose. MOMO can be used as a direct work tool, as an app for children and young people to share their daily experiences and as a way to prepare for and submit their views for important meetings such as child protection conferences, children looked after reviews and child in need review meetings. Workers are encouraged to support all children and young people to set up and use a MOMO account.

We should always be aware that what children say is only one dimension of what they are actually telling us. We need to recognise behaviour as a means of communication too and be alert to behavioural indications of children and young people that may indicate worries.

All children's case files must also have an up to date summary, chronology and three generational genogram to support our understanding of the child's lived experience and their place in their network of origin.

From capturing the child's voice to evidencing it has been heard

Moving from recording a child's wishes and feelings to proactively involving them in decision making wherever possible is embodied within our professional standards – Knowledge and Skills Statements for Child and Family Practitioners. Workers need to create a context by which children and young people are able to take part in decisions made about them, are aware of their right to be heard and the processes that support this. This helps children and young people to have a full understanding of their situation and potentially influence the options available to them.

This means being actively involved in such things as creating their child's plan, personal education plan, pathway plan, safety plan, child protection plan etc. We should aim for co-

production and at least achieve participation: participation meaning being consulted and having the opportunity to give your perspective whilst co-production means the young person is an equal partner and co-creator.

This goes beyond the capturing the voice of the child as it demonstrates the voice has been heard. It will not always be possible to support achieving the wishes expressed by the child or young person particularly where this may fail to keep them safe but this should not deter workers from recording the child or young person's views. This should be documented along with an explanation as to why the wishes can't be fulfilled, exploring any alternative options or compromises that can be made. This should always include a direct conversation with the child or young person to provide an explanation.

We should always re-visit a child's wishes if they remain constant as circumstances, risks and safety may change and evolve. Keeping this under review and showing clear 'workings out' evidences that we are listening

As with routine practice, children and young people should be fully informed of their right to make a complaint and issued with a copy of the complaints procedure. The use of advocacy should also be routinely considered, not only in the context of complaints, but where an advocate might help a child to speak for themselves or to speak on their behalf.

Practice Pointers

Being aware of barriers to good communication

The norms of social interaction vary greatly in different cultures, as do the ways in which emotions are expressed. Workers should therefore be mindful of any barriers which could impact on a child's ability to communicate effectively with them.

Workers should consider the language being used and how this can be supported in a way in which the child understands; especially when considering any additional needs e.g. first language or hearing impairment. Additional tools to assist the process may be required such as the use of adapted technology or an interpreter.

We also need to ensure that we make tailored specific efforts with children and young people with special educational needs or a disability (SEND) to capture their voices and understand their experiences. Some may have additional vulnerabilities - they may have extra communication needs, they might not understand that what is happening to them is concerning or they may be isolated from others and dependent on adults for care.

In addition, research by [VIPER](#) tells us that disabled children and young people have fewer opportunities to participate in decision-making than their non-disabled peers and many are still being excluded. Children and young people with higher support and communication needs face significant additional barriers to participation and we will need to adapt our methods of communicating accordingly, at times accessing more specialist resources.

Many children and young people with a learning disability can use or recognise some signs. Signalong and Makaton are both sign supported systems based on British Sign Language

(BSL), which are used to aid the spoken word. You can find specific resources though these links: [Signalong website](#), [Makaton website](#) and [British Deaf Association website](#) .

Hull's CYPFS Children with Disabilities Team have found using Inprint 3 particularly valuable in ascertaining the views of children and young people who are non-verbal or unable to sign. The system is a desktop publishing programme that also relates symbols to words helping children to express their views and workers to accurately reflect and capture their wishes, feelings and experiences. Workers are welcome to contact the team directly to find out more.

For all children and young people, in addition to what they are directly telling us, observing how a child interacts with their parent(s) or carers and how they respond to them and their emotional needs is an important way in which the child's voice can be captured. Workers should factually record what they have seen and their analysis of this as this can be just as important as what the child tells us.

Speech, body language, facial expression and voice tone are all equally important in supporting communication and capturing voices.

Capturing the child's voice at key moments and throughout their journey

The child's unique voice and lived experience should be captured and explicitly referred to on each home visit, in every assessment and all distinct processes such as enquiries under section 47 Children Act 1989, core group meetings, reviews etc. However, it is equally important that recording the child's voice flows as a coherent narrative in parallel throughout the child's case file and is not just made up of one off events or 'snapshots' of their voice. Care experienced young people tell us about the impact of later 'filling in the gaps' and feeling disempowered by their lack of visibility and consistent voice in our record keeping.

Be mindful too of recording in a way that supports the child to only tell their story once. A new workers should be able to read a child's case file and understand the child's story and have a sense of their unique needs, vulnerabilities, strengths and resilience.

Also, there are often professionals involved in making decisions about children who have never met or seen them in person, such as members of Hull CYPFS internal panels or the Court. It is therefore important that the detail in case recordings enables anyone reading the child's documentation to have a full and detailed understanding about them.

Attached at the end of this document is Top 10 Tips from BASW 'Recording in Children's Social Work' that you may find useful.

Adopting an open and empathic approach

Language is incredibly powerful and we need to be constantly mindful of the words we choose to describe what we're worried about including harmful events and parental behaviours. Consider how an adopted child might feel later reading events that led to their removal from their immediate family and descriptions of their birth parents. Is the rationale

clear for our actions? Is this written in an informative yet thoughtful manner? Have we also included positive events, traits and behaviours that provides a balanced and valid record for the child?

Recordings need to be evidence based and accurate whilst also acknowledging difficult social circumstances experienced by children and families. Recordings should take account of the relationship between poverty and social deprivation, and the effect of stress on family functioning and acceptance of help and support. Your recording should also consider the family history and how this might affect the ability of adults to engage with services.

Is the recording trauma aware? Does the recording show an understanding of potential attachment and complex trauma issues of the parents that might help the child understand their own situation better?

Does the recording demonstrate professional curiosity?

Being professionally curious about what we have seen and heard in relation to the child's lived experience keeps us questioning our assumptions, probing our rationale and exploring our evidence. If we see a correlation between the past, present and future do our recordings evidence this? Would the child later reading their file know how curious, interested and inquisitive we have been about them and in fully capturing their voice?

Key findings from Serious Case Reviews (now known as Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews) focusing specifically on the voice of the child reminds us that in too many cases:

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

Put yourself in the shoes of a service experienced reader

Consider what it would feel like to read about your early life and your family. What would be important for you to know? What might be misinterpreted, lost or unexplained? What might be the impact of not knowing or of finding out something you were not aware of? If you are including photographs and mementoes in the case file be sure to provide an explanation of what it is and its significance. How would you want to be represented in the recordings? You want the reader to be left with a clear sense of who you are and 'what happened to me' and in what context rather than 'what's wrong with me'. It's also important to never describe the child or young person as 'this case'.

Who else can help in capturing the child's voice?

Others in the child's network may have a contribution to helping us more fully capture the child's voice.

Consider people within the family network and what input they might have in helping us understand and articulate the child's voice. For example, have we involved the non-resident father who is so often absent from our case recordings? Sometimes this lack of visibility and engagement can be an outcome of a lack of curiosity on our part in finding and involving them in the first instance. In excluding fathers we are also omitting the whole paternal network. This is important and can help the child understand connections, belonging and identity. For children that we look after, this can be particularly important.

Also consider the child's professional network as the contribution of a child's foster carer, teacher, youth worker or health visitor could help. Teachers in particular often have an important relationship with the child based on trust and familiarity and can provide real insight into what life is like for the child.

You will also need to think about how you will capture the voice of the unborn child and preverbal children. You will need to use direct observation of babies and young children by a range of people and make sense of these observations in relation to risk factors and safety. What are grandparents, neighbours and older brothers and sisters telling us? Have we given these views sufficient weight?

Have you fully considered diversity issues your recordings?

In capturing the child's voice, do your recordings identify characteristics related to diversity and identity? Have you recorded faithfully how the child see themselves, their place in their family, their network and their specific local community in Hull? Does the narrative show how their experiences have impacted on their identity and give a full and real sense of who they are and what shaped them?

What's the role of supervision?

All practice should be supported by regular, high quality reflective supervision. Each time a child or young person is discussed in supervision you will need to consider the child's voice and applying critical reflection and analysis to this. For further details, the reader is referred to Hull CYPFS **Supervision – Best Practice Guidance**. Auditing practice will also consider how well the child's voice is captured and Ofsted will look at how the child's voice is demonstrated in all aspects of child and family social work.

How does this fit with our practice model?

This recording guidance is also compatible with our Social Work Practice Model – **Signs of Safety**.

Further guidance integral to the model will be made available as we progress on our organisational learning journey with Signs of Safety and electronic recording forms will change on Liquidlogic too. At this early stage of implementation, recording practice should start to incorporate the three column approach into our thinking.

- What are we worried about? (past harm, future danger and complicating factors)
- What is working well? (existing strengths and safety)
- What needs to happen? (future safety and success)

These three fundamental questions are integral in capturing the voice of the child and practitioners will be trained to use a range of resources to support children and young people to articulate what they're worried about, what they want to happen and their aspirations for the future. For example, the three houses model mimics the key themes in a way which is more accessible to children, allowing practitioners to capture the child's views and record them in their own words for inclusion within the case files.

Within the Signs of Safety assessment and planning framework and captured within the Liquidlogic forms, practitioners will be routinely prompted to record "Who would the child say are the most important people to them?" This is another opportunity to record the child's voice and gives us a much richer picture than simply recording who is in the family network.

Conclusion

In summary, capturing the child's voice within case recordings is a professional responsibility that when done well can support participatory decision making and a clear sense of identity.

Our case records may be the only biographical record that a child or young person might have of their life and we have a duty to ensure the highest of standards in ethical recording that clearly charts their journey, wishes, feelings, views and experiences throughout.

Ultimately, capturing the child's voice well and reflecting this in decisions, plans, and our recording practice shows that we care.

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TOP
TIPS

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Recording in Children's Social Work



Part of BASW England's 80-20 Campaign

