



## **Writing to the child introduction & resources**

### **Introduction**

This document has been created to bring together research about why it is important to explore writing to the child in recording within all service areas and not just Children Looked After and Children With Disabilities. We spend much of our time writing and recording, whether that be visits, assessments, plans, risk assessments, reports and so on. It is important that we keep in mind who we are writing to and how we are putting what has happened, what has been said and our thoughts to written words.

There are two main reasons to start looking at writing to the child: 1 – these are the child's records and at 18 (or younger if competent) they have the right to view these files; it helps a young person's sense of identity and resilience, reduces redacting, limits upset from reading their history and limits breakdown in trust in services. 2 - to ensure we keep child-focused within our work and decision making and ensure good quality recording. For example, within inspections/ audits some recording of visits can be impersonal or blunt and better records emanate warmth and interest; they are written to or with the child.

We must think more about our language, use of jargon and relevance when we write to the child. Think about times you may have had to do this, such as within Child Permanence Reports or letters.

That is not to say all recording should be written to the child as there will be times this is not necessary or appropriate. We should not write to a child when we are not deciding or undertaking any meaningful enquiries about safeguarding, such as Court requests or Occupational Therapy requests. Other examples where it would not be appropriate to write to the child such in Placement With Parents report, Court statements, parenting assessments and reunification assessments etc. It will also not be appropriate to write to a child who has died, even though we are still sensitive within our recording.

We will continue to have conversations around this topic and explore it further, such as with your team or at Team Tuesdays. We cannot change all the language we use for detailing processes a child will be subject to and some recording will be for

a different audience. But it is important we take time to explain the purpose of what we are doing to the child in language they understand.

Einstein's quote: ***'if you can't explain it to a six-year-old, you don't understand it yourself.'***

The below list is links to the relevant service's grid of where to write to the child. There is flexibility with your manager about what can be written to the child or 1<sup>st</sup> person recorded and what not to:

- Assessment
- Family Safeguarding
- Adolescents
- Children With Disabilities
- Children Looked After & Care Leavers
- Fostering
- Residential
- Gateway to Referrals
- Family Time (contact)
- Audit & Practice Standards

## **Definitions (see separate document for examples)**

### **Dear diary – writing to the child style.**

This is written in second person, where the writer uses second-person pronouns such as 'you'. Its writing in a dear diary style where you are writing to the child as if you were writing them a letter. For example, "Lemon, you gave me a big smile when I saw you and was excited to show me the science project you had done for school. You were so proud of it and told me about how you made it."

### **1<sup>st</sup> Person recording**

A first-person narrative is a way of recording through the child's point of view. It uses first-person pronouns such as 'I', 'me' and 'we'. For example, "I am very proud of the science project I did for school, I worked really hard on it and want to show it to everyone."

## **Resources**

["Children's voices" omitted from care records, UCL study finds | UCL News - UCL – University College London](#)

The *MIRRA* (Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access) project, led by Professor Elizabeth Shepherd. Found that voices of children (who had lived in social care) were largely absent from their records which caused significant distress and

left them with “feelings of blame and a lack of self-worth.” Effective recording was not valued/ understood by local authorities. Professor Shepherd suggests that records are essential for “memory making and identity” for care leavers, that experiences of the child must be at the heart of records.

[https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/PT\\_Evidencing\\_defensible\\_decision-making\\_on\\_records\\_with\\_%E2%80%98the\\_child\\_at\\_your\\_shoulder\\_Final.pdf](https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/PT_Evidencing_defensible_decision-making_on_records_with_%E2%80%98the_child_at_your_shoulder_Final.pdf)

This research in practice report, although writing with practice supervisors in mind, is a useful report in understanding importance of quality of practice including writing to the child. It brings together various research and articles to support this. It discusses a shift in power to the control of information and taking a relational approach; to imagine the child is at your shoulder when writing. Social workers who took part in a research project were more focused on recording significant events, updates, explanations and so on when writing to the child directly. Prevents writing with a distant voice to more personalised and child focused. This is a lengthy article but easy to read and digest.

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/may/02/i-was-dehumanised-lemn-sissay-on-hearing-his-harrowing-abuse-report-live-on-stage>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uwj5XKzOadM>

<https://blog.lemnissay.com/>

Although not explicitly about writing to a child, Lemn Sissay is a care leaver who speaks passionately and powerfully about his care records (and time in care). He discusses how we need to think about ensuring the child is at the centre and that they are involved within recording, the significant impact records have on children. Shaping our understanding of them, the care they are provided and the role they have on children understanding their time when involved with children’s services.

['I wanted to go back and stand up for the little girl that I was' - Community Care](#)

Care-experienced practitioner Rebekah Pierre discusses her “disbelief and anger” on reading her case notes, and the open letter to her social worker addressing the blaming language she found. This is not explicitly about writing to the child but addresses the importance of our language and keeping in mind the child would one day have access to their files.

<https://wisper.writinginsocialwork.com/resource/writing-to-the-child/>

Video of Gillian Lucas, IRO, about how writing to the child is like a conversation with a child explaining what is going on, importance of it being clear to help understand and why it fits in with the social work values of remaining child focused. That it can

take longer while learning to do this as it takes time to adjust habits of writing to the child instead of about the child but that it becomes easier in time.

### [Layout 1 \(basw.co.uk\)](https://www.basw.co.uk)

This is BASW's top tips about recording including about writing to the child, when possible, about how it helps to focus recording on the child's experience and into something clear children may one day see as well as being a powerful tool.

[https://issuu.com/socialworknews/docs/swn\\_summer\\_2022\\_issuu/s/16059407](https://issuu.com/socialworknews/docs/swn_summer_2022_issuu/s/16059407)

This is a short social work news article about changing our habits to write to the child and how we can do this, points around not dumbing down language as important not to misrepresent information (such as watering down domestic abuse), explaining direct work, forgetting jargon and being cautious if leaving out information if struggling to write it child friendly.

### **Tips**

The above research and articles contain a lot of tips and tricks to help us withing our writing style and perspective on this, but see below:

- Be sensitive and warm within the writing, imagine the child is at your shoulder while you are writing. Imagine them reading it at 18.
- This does not mean leaving out information or watering down concerns. Such as calling domestic abuse arguments does not reflect power imbalances and absolves perpetrators accountability. Kick, push, hit, shout, use mean nicknames etc can be used rather than umbrella terms. It is important to be factual with our information, this is the child's life and experience.
- Use simple language, avoid jargon, long sentences and explain when required – such as explaining what a professional is or what identity means.
- If recording for a sibling group or to a child over an extended period where they are at different ages, do not worry so much about writing to a specific age. The above is more important.
- Recording can be split; for example, within assessments and some reports we would not be writing the whole document to the child which allows space for recording specific documentation/ information.
- Visit notes and within module 4 of the workbook can be split as well, so to allow any additional notes of observations or facts required.
- If you are writing something delicate such as a child being hurt by a parent, then can preface that a caution or think about how to write this in a child-

friendly manner. Like how we do in later life letters or child permanence reports. “This will be difficult to read, and you may feel sad or angry when reading it which is understandable, on... this happened .... Which caused you to be hurt...”

- Or “your mummy wanted to do the right things for you but did not know how to and was not able to understand what the right thing because of her learning needs. This meant she... which we were worried would...”
- As with all recording, just because a child is non-verbal, have a disability or is a baby/ young child, does not mean they do not have a voice. Their wishes and feelings are still shown through observations, behaviour, and the relationships with those around them.

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