

Practical hints, tips and resources to help us listen to, and understand the voices of all children in North Yorkshire.



"When children are seen, heard, and believed, they are safer, stronger, and more empowered to shape their world."

Introduction

"When children are seen, heard, and believed, they are safer, stronger, and more empowered to shape their world."

This toolkit has been developed by the North Yorkshire Safeguarding Children Partnership in response to local and national multi-agency thematic audits and serious case reviews, identifying, in some cases, an absence of the voice of the child, particularly those children who are not able to communicate verbally.

Capturing and listening to the voice of the child is a fundamental practice linked with strong professional curiosity, and we recommend that the NYSCP <u>Professional Curiosity</u> practice guidance be read alongside this document.

Listening to and facilitating the voice of the child is a key part of strong safeguarding practice. It helps professionals to understand children's experiences, identify their needs and recognise any risks or protective factors in their lives.

This toolkit is accompanied by an additional resource, which looks at:

- What do we mean by the voice of the child
- Why is it important to listen to and believe the voice of the child
- Benefits of listening to the voice of the child
- Barriers to hearing the voice of the child
- · Services in North Yorkshire
- Learning from National and Local cases
- Practical case examples

Access by clicking this link, Voice of the Child or scanning the QR below:





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Click on the link to be taken to the relevant section. Links are embedded throughout the document.

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Hearing a Child's Voice in Practice Key Principles:

Child-centred communication is not a one-off event, but a continuous process of engagement, interpretation and action

Watch the short NSPCC video below that highlights the key elements of facilitating the voice of the child:



Hearing a child's voice in practice is more than simply asking them for their views. It involves creating safe, trusting environments where children feel empowered to express themselves in ways that are meaningful to them. This includes recognising non-verbal communication, adapting to developmental stages, and being sensitive to trauma, identity, and cultural context.

Key points:

- Pay attention to all the different ways a child may be trying to communicate.
- Ask other professionals for their knowledge of the child
- Identify and speak to those closest to the child
- Challenge barriers to seeing the child alone and hearing their voice
- Empower children to make sure their voice is heard
- Understand the child's identity and background, and check your own biases and preconceptions
- Provide children with the tools they need to communicate effectively
- Build trusted relationships with children
- Include the child's voice and your observations in all assessments, arrangements and decisions

Further information on these points can be accessed at the NSPCC Learning page: How do we hear and facilitate the voice of the child?



Things to consider - quick guide



Be child-centred & Developmentally attuned

Tailor communication to the child's age, understanding, and preferred ways of expressing themselves.

Offer choice and control

Let them choose how to share (e.g., "Would you like to draw or talk?"). Respect their "no," consent is key, even at a young age.

Create safe, trusting relationships

Children are more likely to share when they feel emotionally safe and respected.

Use a range of communication methods

Consider drawing, play, storytelling, visual tools, and observation, especially for babies, nonverbal children, or those with SEND.

Consider context

Think about the places and spaces where a child may or may not want to share their voice.

Be curious & reflective, not interrogative

Explore what a child's behaviour, silence, or play might be communicating. Avoid assumptions or adult interpretations.

Respect identity and difference

Consider how culture, disability, gender, and lived experience shape how a child communicates and is heard.

Act on what is heard

Demonstrate that the child's voice influences decisions and outcomes. Feedback loops build trust and credibility.

Reflect and Validate

Mirror their language and emotions: "It sounds like that made you feel sad." Praise their effort to share, not just the content.

Challenge barriers and biases

Be aware of unconscious bias, power dynamics, and systemic inequalities that may silence or distort the child's voice

Be aware and curious about what a child is not saying or doing

The voice of a child can also be demonstrated through the absence of something as well as the presence of something.

Create safe, predictable spaces

Use routines and familiar settings to reduce anxiety.
Give clear, simple explanations about what's happening and why.

Be creative

Use play and creativity to think about the best way to communicate with and hear the voice of the child. Explore resources and use of technology.

Use open - ended questions

Tell me about your day," or "What was the best part of your week?" Avoid leading questions or pressure to get the information you feel you need. Listen to what the child wants to tell you.

Be patient and understanding

There may be times when a child does not want to speak to you. Acknowledge and understand that, reflect and be curious why this may be.



All children have the right to be heard and taken seriously in matters which affect them.

 Article 12, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) If the behaviour could talk, what would it say?

Only those who truly care can hear you even when you're quiet.

Importance of Understanding Developmental Stages

Understanding the developmental stages of children and young people is essential for interpreting their voices accurately and respectfully.

A child's ability to express thoughts, feelings, and experiences evolves with age, cognitive maturity, and emotional development. Without this awareness, practitioners risk misinterpreting silence, behaviour, or limited verbal responses as disengagement or lack of insight. Developmentally informed practice ensures that communication methods, expectations, and safeguarding responses are tailored to the child's age and stage, creating safer, more inclusive spaces for children to be heard.

This approach is supported by frameworks such as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and statutory guidance in Working Together to Safeguard Children, which emphasise the need for ageappropriate engagement and assessment.

Key Resources for Understanding Developmental Stages

Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework – GOV.UK

This statutory guidance sets out the standards for learning, development, and care for children from birth to age 5. It emphasises the need for age-appropriate engagement and assessment, which is crucial when interpreting a child's voice.

EYFS Statutory Framework Overview

EYFS PDF for Group and School-Based Providers

Early years foundation stage statutory framework For childminders

Why This Matters

Understanding developmental stages ensures that:

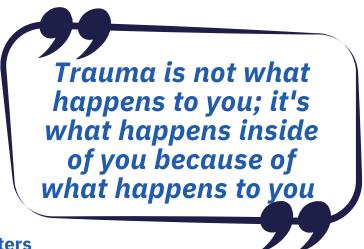
- Children are not expected to articulate thoughts or emotions beyond their cognitive or emotional capacity.
- Practitioners can choose the right tools and approaches (e.g. play-based, visual, verbal) for each age group.
- Safeguarding assessments are fair, inclusive, and developmentally informed.

Further resources (click on the links)

https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/child-development-and-trauma-guide/ https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/developmental-trauma-easy-read-explanation-guides-

Trauma-Informed Practice & the Voice of the Child

Trauma-informed practice is essential for creating safe, respectful, and empowering environments where children feel able to share their voices. It recognises that trauma, whether from abuse, neglect, loss, or adversity, can deeply affect how children communicate, trust adults, and engage with services. Practitioners must be sensitive to these impacts and adapt their approach to avoid re-traumatisation and support healing.



Why This Matters

- Trauma can silence children: Fear, shame, or confusion may prevent children from speaking openly. Traumainformed practice helps practitioners interpret behaviour and non-verbal cues as expressions of voice.
- Relationships are key: Research shows that the quality of the relationship between practitioner and child is one of the strongest predictors of positive outcomes.
- Children need to feel safe: Trauma-informed environments prioritise emotional safety, predictability, and trust; conditions that allow children to express themselves freely



Find our more about Trauma-Informed Practice in Humber and North Yorkshire by clicking the icon below:



Click here to access the Children and Young People's Trauma **Informed Care Programmes E-Learning "Trauma awareness"**



Observations

Observing Children: Why it Matters:

Observation is a powerful tool for understanding a child's lived experience, especially when verbal communication is limited or absent. It allows practitioners to notice subtle cues in behaviour, body language, interactions, and environment that may reveal unmet needs, emotional states, or safeguarding concerns. Observations help triangulate information from other sources, challenge assumptions, and build a fuller picture of the child's world.

What to Look For

Effective observation involves more than watching; it requires curiosity, interpretation, and reflection. Practitioners should pay attention to:

- Daily routines and transitions: How the child responds to changes or structured activities.
- Emotional and physical well-being: Signs of distress, fatigue, or comfort.
- Social interactions: Engagement with peers, adults, and family members.
- Communication styles: Gestures, facial expressions, vocalisations, and use of tools like Makaton or visual prompts
- Environmental context: Safety, stimulation, and accessibility of the child's surroundings.

Practitioner Reflection

Always reflect on what you've seen:

- What might this behaviour be communicating?
- Are there discrepancies between observation and verbal reports?
- What further information is needed to understand the child's experience?

Observations should be documented clearly and revisited during reviews or when significant changes occur in the child's life.





Asking questions & Appreciative Enquiry

Asking the right questions and asking them in the right way is key to understanding a child's lived experience. Effective questioning helps practitioners move beyond assumptions, uncover hidden concerns, and empower children to express themselves in ways that feel safe and meaningful. Whether verbal or non-verbal, questions should be age-appropriate, trauma-informed, and rooted in genuine curiosity.

Tips for asking questions

- Start by creating emotional safety: Children are more likely to respond openly when they feel safe, respected, and not rushed.
- Use open-ended questions to encourage fuller responses:

"Can you tell me what that's like?"

"What do you like about...?"

"How does that make you feel?"

- Adapt your questions to the child's age and understanding: Consider both their developmental and chronological age when choosing language and structure.
- **Give time and space for thinking:** Don't rush to fill silence; children often need time to process and respond.
- Use closed or forced-choice questions only when needed: These can help clarify or support children who are stuck.
- "Do you like reading by yourself or being read to?"

- Avoid overly closed or leading questions that limit or shape the child's response.
- **Use exploratory language** to invite shared reflection:
 - "I'm wondering what it's like when..."
- Reflect back what the child says to show you've listened and to encourage more sharing:
 - "You said it feels scary... scary how?"
- Be mindful of tone and body language: Your non-verbal cues should match your words and show genuine interest.



Appreciative enquiry is a way to engage people in change, focusing on what is working rather than what is not, and helps people uncover strengths, advantages, and opportunities.

Additional resources looking at appreciative enquiry and the use of questioning when supporting children and families include (click on the links):



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Questions

Below are some examples of questions you could consider to hlep capture children's vpices in a safe, respectful and trauma-infomred way



"What's something

that made you feel

happy/safe

today?"

"Can you tell me about a time when you felt really

listened to?"

Exploring Experiences

Creative & Indirect Prompts

"If your day was a

story, what would

the title be?"

"Who helps you feel safe when things are hard?"

Safety & Support

"What's something you're proud of?"

Empowering Voice

"Is there anything that's been bothering you lately?"

"What do you wish grown-ups understood better about you?"

"Can you draw or show me what your 'safe place' looks like?" "Is there anything you want me to know that's hard to say?"

"Is there anything you'd like to say that you haven't been asked about yet?"

"If your feelings were colours, what colour would you be today?" "If you could change one thing about your day, what would it be?"

"If you had a magic wand, what would you make better right now?"

"What should I do if you're feeling worried or upset?" "What's something you'd like adults to remember about you?"

"What does a good day feel like for you?"

"Can you tell me about a time when someone made you feel really safe or happy?"

"If you could draw your feelings today, what would they look like?" "Is there a person or place that helps you feel calm when things get tricky?"

"What's something you wish adults would ask you more often?"





Pre/Post Birth & Early Years

Pre-Birth



Capturing the voice of the unborn child means anticipating and advocating for their needs before birth. This includes understanding the family's circumstances, strengths, and challenges, and ensuring that the baby's welfare is central to planning and decision-making. Practitioners must balance empathy for the parent(s) with a clear focus on the baby's safety, development, and right to a nurturing environment. It also involves multi-agency collaboration, early assessment, and respectful but robust conversations about risk, support, and change.

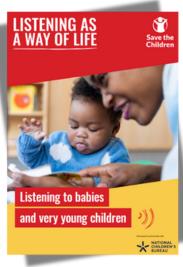
Key Considerations:

- Use of pre-birth assessments to explore parenting capacity, history, and readiness. (NYSCP safeguarding unborn babies (pre-birth assessment))
- Understanding the unborn child's world through the lens of parental health, relationships, housing, substance use, and support networks.
- Listening to the parents' voice; their hopes, fears, and intentions, while also holding the baby in mind.
- Exploring family and cultural identity—including genograms and family trees with culture to understand belonging and potential support.
- Planning for safety and attachment—ensuring that the baby will be born into a safe, stable, and emotionally responsive environment.

Using reflective supervision to explore professional bias, emotional responses, and ethical dilemmas in pre-birth work.







Post Birth

Babies and young children lead rich lives; they are competent beings and experts in their own lives. From birth, they have thoughts, feelings and preferences which they are capable of communicating. That is, they have a voice. The concept of 'voice' for this youngest age group relates to deliberate self-expression, and there are many different ways of expressing voice beyond the articulation of words or sentences



Further resources & Tools:

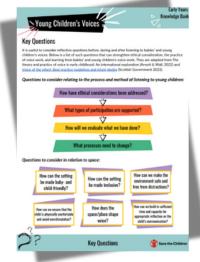
- Ages & Stages Questionnaires ASQ-3 (Child development screening tool) - Free Social Work Tools and Resources: SocialWorkersToolbox.com
- Observations Forms | Early Years Resources | Download | Print
- Routine-based interview: <u>conversation starters rbi.pdf</u> Structured logs of behaviour, vocalisations, and interactions.
- <u>Daily Routine Assessment Tool "A Day in My Life:</u>
 <u>Baby" Free Social Work Tools and Resources:</u>
 <u>SocialWorkersToolbox.com</u>
- Treasure baskets: What Is A Treasure Basket? The
 Essential Guide Early Impact Learning (Observe
 preferences and reactions to different textures and
 objects.
- A day in the life of my baby

- Changes in behaviour: withdrawal, clinginess, aggression, or regression (e.g. sleep or toileting).
- Facial expressions: frowning, smiling, eye contact, or gaze aversion.
- Vocalisations: cooing, crying, babbling, or changes in tone and pitch.
- Body language: flinching, arching, reaching out, or turning away.
- Responses to people: comfort-seeking or avoidance of specific adults.
- Play patterns: repetitive play, symbolic play, or avoidance of certain toys or themes.
- Feeding and sleeping disruptions may signal emotional distress or unmet needs.
- Interaction with caregivers: signs of secure or insecure attachment.



Safeguarding Unborn Babies
NYSCP Practice Guidance







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The Toddler Years (approximately 1- 3 years old)

As children move into the toddler years (approximately 1–3 years old), their communication, emotional, and social development rapidly evolves. Capturing their voice during this stage requires adapting your approach to match their growing, but still limited, verbal and emotional expression.

Key Factors to Consider When Listening to Toddlers:

- Emerging Language Skills
- Toddlers may use single words, short phrases, gestures, or sounds to communicate.
- Be patient with unclear speech and validate all attempts to express themselves.
- Non-Verbal communication
- Body language, facial expressions, tone, and play are still primary communication tools.
- Watch for cues like pointing, pushing away, or changes in energy and mood.
- Emotional Regulation
- Toddlers are learning to manage big feelings with limited tools.
- Tantrums, clinginess, or withdrawal may signal unmet needs or distress.
- Need for Repetition and Routine
- Familiar routines and repeated activities help toddlers feel safe and understood.
- Use consistent language and visual cues to support understanding.
- Play as Expression
- Play can be a toddler's language; observe how they interact with toys, people, and environments.
- Use symbolic play (e.g. dolls, animals) to explore feelings and experiences.
- Attachment and Relationships
- Toddlers rely heavily on trusted adults to feel secure.
- Their voice is often best understood in the context of their relationship with caregivers.
- Cultural and Family Context
- Consider how toddlers are supported to express themselves within their family and cultural norms.
- Some may be encouraged to be expressive, while others may be more reserved.
- Developmental Variability
- Every toddler develops at their own pace—adjust expectations accordingly.
- Be mindful of developmental delays or neurodivergence that may affect communication.





The Ages & Stages
Questionnaires ASQ-3
is a comprehensive set
of questionnaires
designed to assess
children's
development from 2 to
66 months.



Resources & Tools



Treasure Baskets

A treasure basket is a shallow basket filled with a variety of everyday objects, carefully selected to stimulate the curiosity and sensory exploration of babies and young children. These items can include natural materials and household objects, allowing children to interact with them independently and discover new textures, shapes, and sounds.

They can be used as an opportunity to observe preferences and reactions to different textures & objects. Be curious and consider why they may be interacting with objects.

What is a treasure basket?

Sensory play

Sensory play is a powerful tool for capturing the voice of toddlers, especially when verbal communication is still developing. Through touch, sound, movement, and exploration, children express preferences, emotions, and reactions that offer valuable insight into their experiences and needs. Observing how a toddler engages with sensory materials, whether they show curiosity, hesitation, joy, or distress. This can help to interpret their voice in a developmentally appropriate way. Sensory play also builds trust and connection, creating a safe space where children feel free to express themselves without pressure or expectation.



Sensory play ideas

Why not try?

Water Play

Messy Play with Safe Materials (e.g. jelly, cooked pastaetc)

Sound Exploration

Scented Play Dough or Natural Materials (e.g. herbs, citrus peels)



The guide includes activities, songs, books, and developmental milestones to promote learning and engagement in infants and toddlers ages 0-3 years.

Primary - Teenage Years

As children grow, their ability to express themselves may become more sophisticated, but so do the challenges they face in being heard. From early primary school through adolescence, children's voices must be captured in ways that are developmentally appropriate, emotionally safe, and culturally sensitive. Practitioners need to adapt their approach to match the child's age, communication style, and lived experience, allowing them to share their voice in places and spaces and times that feel safe for them. This includes recognising when children are telling us something through behaviour, silence, or creative expression, and ensuring their views are not overshadowed by adult assumptions or systems.

Primary Years (Ages 5-11)

Key Factors to Consider

- Language is developing, but still limited: use simple, clear questions and avoid jargon.
- Play and creativity are powerful tools: Drawing, storytelling, and games can help children express complex feelings.
- Children may want to please adults: Be mindful of leading questions or power dynamics.
- **Use visual tools:** emotion charts, "All About Me" sheets, and traffic light systems can support expression.
- Routine and familiarity matter: children are more likely to open up in safe, predictable environments.

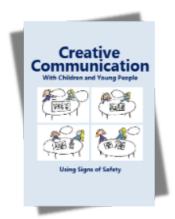
Pre-Teens and Early Adolescents (Ages 11–14)

Key Factors to Consider

- Growing self-awareness and sensitivity to judgment: create non-judgmental spaces where they feel respected.
- **Peer influence increases:** they may be reluctant to share if they fear being different or misunderstood.
- Use indirect methods: journaling, music, or digital tools can help them express themselves safely.
- Validate their emotions: avoid minimising or dismissing their concerns as "just a phase."









Resources & Tools

Social Work Toolbox

Social Work Toolbox offers a wide variety of worksheets, booklets, advice sheets, assessment • templates and checklists, story books, videos, guides and workbooks downloads for direct work with children and families. Many of these are great • resources for capturing the voice of the child:

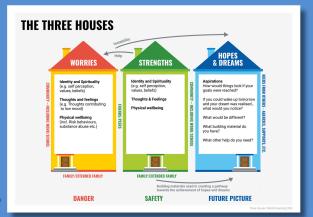
- Voice of the child toolkit: a collection of useful tools designed to engage and hear the perspectives of children and young people
- 20 sheets to gain the child's wishes, feelings & views

3 houses - wishes & feelings

The Three Houses template is a valuable tool that can be used to engage children in meaningful conversations about their thoughts, feelings, and aspirations. It's a creative and interactive tool designed to explore three important aspects of a child's life, represented by three different houses:

- 1. **House of Worries:** This is where children or families can list their concerns and worries. It provides a safe space to identify and discuss challenges they are facing.
- 2. **House of Good Things:** In this house, people can share the positive aspects of their lives. It encourages them to focus on their strengths, achievements, and things that make them happy.
- 3. **House of Hopes and Dreams:** Here, children or families can express their aspirations and goals for the future. It helps in setting targets and working towards a better outcome.

Click on the images for more information and templates





Be creative:

Use games and activities to build relationships and capture their voice in a fun and meaningful way:

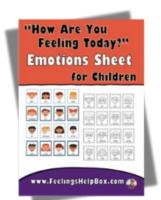
Feelings Jenga (Each block has a question or prompts written in it)

Emoji & picture cards - ask a child to pick one to describe how they feel that day and why.

Would you rather...? Use to explore preferences, values and feelings, e.g. "would you rather be invisible for the day or be able to fly"

Special objects - ask the child to bring special objects with them-

explore why they are special **Use Technology:** Ask children to take pictures or share voice notes, or use apps like Mind of my Own



Adolescence & the Transition to Adulthood.

Adolescents are experts in their own lives. Their insights are essential for shaping services that are relevant, respectful, and effective. Listening to young people builds trust, promotes healing, and supports autonomy, especially important for those with histories of trauma, care experience, or marginalisation. As young people approach 18, they can face critical transitions. Their voice must guide planning for adulthood.

Adolescents tell us the importance of being heard by adults, and studies show that listening to the voices of adolescents and young adults regarding their lived experiences could be a way to identify important skills and abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that will enable youth to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life.



Things to consider:

• Create Psychological Safety

- Use calm, non-judgmental language.
- Offer choices (e.g., "Would you prefer to talk here or go for a walk?").
- Be consistent and predictable in your approach.
- Always be aware of and speak to the young person about the context they feel safest speaking with you.

• Build Trust Over Time

- Don't rush the process; the relationship comes first.
- Show up when you say you will. Reliability builds credibility.
- Be transparent about what will happen with what they share.

• Use Creative and Flexible Methods

- Offer alternatives to verbal communication: drawing, music, journaling, or digital storytelling.
- Use tools like "emotion wheels," "life maps," or "future self" exercises to help them express complex feelings.

Validate and Empower

- Acknowledge their feelings without trying to fix them: "That sounds really tough. Thank you for telling me."
- Reinforce their strengths and resilience: "You've already made it through so much."

• Be Culturally and Developmentally Responsive

- Adapt your language and tools to their age, identity, and background.
- Be conscious of how a young person identifies themselves. Respect this and use language that reflects this.
- Avoid adult-centric assumptions. Ask, don't assume.

Respect Autonomy and Consent

- Always ask permission before asking personal questions.
- Let them lead the pace and depth of the conversation.
- Understand and be respectful of the times when a young person does not want to talk and share their story.

What young people in North Yorkshire told us.

Show me that you're listening. Don't take notes constantly, looking down all the time.

Show an interest in my hobbies. I loved it when you asked to look at the posters in my room

Make me feel comfortable to I can tell you what I'm thinking – don't expect me to do it in a meeting or when I've just met you

Talking over me or telling me that you must be quick because of another meeting makes me feel a bit like a burden.

Talk to me, not my parents/carers all the time. I have something to say too

"I had a worker, she was like a mother to me, I didn't even need to ask her for help, she would put herself in my shoes and help me, if I asked her for something she didn't make me feel like I was a burden on the system....now I have another worker, since he came I started to feel alone and not heard enough, he hasn't come to visit me once, and if we have a meeting about something, he comes and goes in a hurry, I no longer feel cared for, and if I ask him for something, I have to send him messages over and over again, yes sometimes he helps me but most of the time he makes me feel like a burden"

When I feel like I have been listened to it makes me really happy inside, like I matter to people and I am seen. When I feel like I have not been listened to it makes me feel like I am not worth listening to.

Further Reading:

- Eliciting conversations with young people on safety, harm and place
- Life Challenges and Barriers to Help Seeking: Adolescents' and Young Adults' Voices of Mental Health
- Respect the voices, experiences and expertise of children and young people Tackling Child Exploitation

Children with Special Educational Needs

As part of the Children's Commissioner's "Big Ask", [1] children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were very clear about the challenges they face and what they wanted: Children with SEND are less likely to feel safe, more likely to feel lonely and often do not have their needs identified early enough. Young people with SEND want to be understood, seen and heard.

As part of the UN rights if the child, all children, regardless of ability, have the right to express their views, be heard, and be involved in decisions that affect them [2]. Children with SEND may face additional barriers to being heard and understood; therefore, it is essential to make intentional, creative and flexible approaches to listening to them. This can ultimately promote dignity, inclusion and better outcomes for their support needs.

Things to consider:

• Broaden the Definition of "Voice"

Voice is not just spoken words; it includes:

- Gestures
- Facial expressions
- Eye gaze
- Behaviour
- Use of AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication)
- Art, music, movement

(Observe patterns over time)

Use Multi-Sensory and Visual Tools

- ·Visual supports: symbol cards, PECS, now/next boards, choice boards
- ·Tactile tools: sensory objects, textured materials
- ·Digital tools: apps like Widgit Online, Proloquo2Go, or MyChoicePad

Let children choose their preferred method of communication. Offer multiple choices and observe what they gravitate to.

• Create Safe, Predictable Environments

- ·Use consistent routines and familiar adults.
- •Prepare children for what to expect using social stories or visual schedules.
- ·Avoid sudden changes or overstimulating environments.

Safety and predictability reduce anxiety and support communication, especially for children with autism or sensory processing differences.









Talking Mats

Remember.

behaviour is always a

form of

communication.

Work in Partnership with Trusted Adults

Collaborate with parents, carers, and key workers who know the child's communication style. Use shared communication passports or "All About Me" profiles.

Ask, "How does your child show they're happy, worried, or overwhelmed?" This helps decode non-verbal cues.

Be Patient and Responsive

Allow extra time for processing and response.

Avoid interrupting or rushing.

Acknowledge all attempts to communicate, even if they seem small. Silence doesn't mean absence of thought. Wait time is a powerful tool.

Celebrate Strengths and Preferences

Focus on what the child can do and enjoys doing.

Use their interests (e.g., trains, animals, music) as a bridge to connection.

Engagement often starts with joy. Follow their lead.

Remember, a child with SEND may

- Withdraw or become distressed in unfamiliar or overstimulating settings.
- Use behaviour as communication when other methods are unavailable.

What to do:

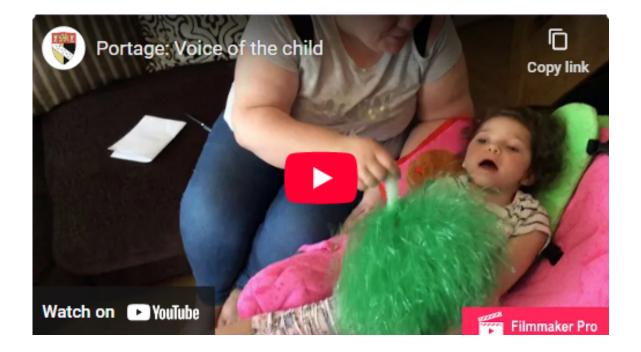
• Slow down. Observe. Be curious, not corrective.

Library

- Use co-regulation strategies (e.g., calm tone, rhythmic breathing).
- Keep trying. Consistency builds trust.

Visit Social **Worker Toolbox** for lots of additional

resources







How to support non-verbal children in early years

Use of Technology

Technology offers powerful, flexible, and creative ways to engage young people and amplify their voices, especially those who may feel more confident expressing themselves digitally than face-to-face. From apps and online surveys to smart devices and virtual spaces, digital tools can help practitioners hear what young people think, feel, and need in ways that are accessible, inclusive, and age-appropriate.

Why It Works

- Digital confidence: Many young people are more comfortable sharing their thoughts online than in person.
- Accessibility: Technology can support children with communication needs through visual, audio, and interactive formats.
- Anonymity and safety: Online platforms can offer a sense of privacy and control, encouraging honest expression.



Here are some creative ways to use technology to capture the voice of children, especially those who may find traditional communication methods challenging:

Pictures & Digital Storytelling Apps

Allow children to share photographs of things that are important to them, or children can use apps like <u>Book Creator</u>, <u>Puppet Pals</u>, or <u>Toontastic</u> to create their own stories using drawings, voice recordings, and animations.

Why it works: It allows children to express their thoughts and feelings in a narrative format that feels playful and safe.

Voice Note Diaries

Using a secure app or device, children can record short voice notes about their day, feelings, or experiences. These can be shared with trusted adults or used in reviews.

Why it works: It captures spontaneous, authentic reflections; especially useful for children who may struggle with written or face-to-face communication.

Interactive Emoji Feedback Tools

Create simple digital check-ins using emojis or visual scales (e.g. "How are you feeling today?" with emoji options). Tools like Mentimeter, Kahoot, or Google Forms can be adapted for this.

Why it works: It's quick, non-verbal, and accessible for younger children or those with SEND.

AI-Powered Chatbots

Child-friendly chatbots can guide children through structured conversations about their well-being, preferences, or experiences. These can be embedded in apps or websites and designed with safeguarding in mind.

Why it works: It offers a private, pressure-free space for children to share, especially those who are more comfortable with digital interaction.

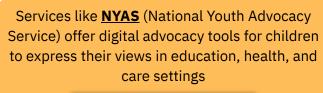
When using technology, it's essential to remain mindful of safeguarding implications and ensure that technology is used without compromising privacy, consent to emotional safety







Mind of My Own is an inclusive app that empowers young people to participate in their lives and communicate their views to a trusted adult. It is a safe digital space where young people can be confident that their information is private and secure. More information about the App can be found here: One app — Mind Of My OwnMind Of My Own





Online Safety For further information about staying safe online, visit the NYSCP webpage Output Outp

When Engagement is Difficult

Disengaged children, those who are withdrawn, fearful, reluctant to speak, hard to reach or mistrustful of professionals, require creative, relational, and trauma-informed approaches to participation. Their voice may be expressed through behaviour, silence, or indirect communication, and practitioners must be curious, patient, and flexible in how they engage.

Some children may:

- Be guarded due to past breaches of trust.
- Be non-verbal or have limited language
- Have English as their second language
- Struggle with emotional regulation or communication.
- Struggle to identify or express their emotions
- Feel their voice "won't make a difference."
- May not know what they want to say or how they want to say it
- May not feel like speaking to anyone that day (be curious about the context and the why)





What to do:

- Start small: Focus on building a connection and developing the relationship before anything else. A smile, a shared activity, or a consistent presence can lay the groundwork.
- Respect all forms of communication, verbal, non-verbal and symbolic.
- Build trust through consistency and presence
- Stay present and patient, don't take it personally if a young person doesn't want to talk to you. It may not be the right time or space, and you may not be the right person. Be <u>professionally curious</u> as to why this might be and explore different hypotheses for this.
- Offer low-pressure, consistent opportunities to connect.
- Celebrate small steps (e.g., showing up, making eye contact, sharing a thought).
- Ask yourself, "What might this behaviour be communicating?"
- Ask yourself, "Have I offered enough ways for this child to express themselves?"
- Reflect with colleagues or your manager to look at other ways you can explore.
- Avoid "doing to" and focus on "working with"
- Check your environment: Is it calm, welcoming, and child-friendly? Sometimes the space itself can be a barrier.
- Use co-working: If engagement is difficult, consider involving a trusted adult or peer to support the process.

Building Positive Relationships

Building a trusted relationship with a child is essential to hearing, understanding, and acting upon what a child is communicating. In practice, it is the quality of these relationships that determines the extent to which children's voices will be heard and included meaningfully in decisions affecting them.

Time and creativity may be required to build enough trust for a child to share their feelings and for you to properly understand what is being communicated. Even where children do not actively participate in meetings, by maintaining a meaningful dialogue, you can advocate for them and ensure that the child's voice is heard and included in decision-making. Ask yourself:

- In addition to face-to-face work, have I considered other communication approaches, including phone calls, texts or online communication via work devices and approved channels?
- Have I allowed enough time and space for the child to feel comfortable sharing their experiences with me?
- Have I demonstrated an active interest in the child's life, views, aspirations, interests, and activities?
- Have I been clear about why the child's views are being gathered, and what will happen with the information they have shared?
- Have I fed back to the child what I have done based on what they have communicated to me?

Be Kind to yourself

It's natural to feel disheartened when you struggle to engage with a child. But remember: resistance is often a form of protection. It's not a reflection of your skill or care, it's a sign that the child needs more time, safety, or support.

- Reflect, don't blame.
- Seek supervision or peer support.
- Celebrate small wins.
- Remember: showing up consistently is powerful in itself.



Strength in

Relationships

Always consider a traumainformed approach Children are not giving us hard time, they are having a hard time

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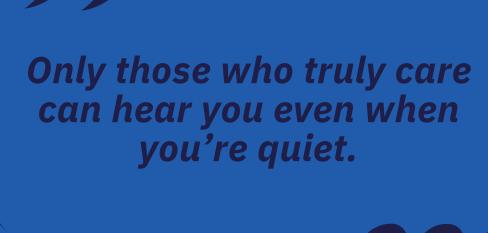


Contact details

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Yorkshire, DL7 8AE

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Accompanying guidance

This toolkit has been developed by the North Yorkshire Safeguarding Children Partnership in response to local and national multi-agency thematic audits and serious case reviews, identifying, in some cases, an absence of the voice of the child, particularly those children who are not able to communicate verbally.

We recommend it be read alongside the accompanying guidance, which can be accessed here, **Voice of the Child** or by scanning the QR below.

